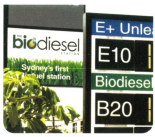
INDEPENDENT INFORMATION FOR SMART CONSUMERS

choice

FEBRUARY 2009 • WWW.CHOICE.COM.AU

Shadecloths
Our investigation reveals you may not be as safe from the sun's rays as you hoped.



Eco-driving
While fuel prices fluctuate wildly, we look at ways to reduce your fuel bills.

On test

- Dishwashers
- Cordless phones
- Media players
- Vacuums
- Kettles
- HD set-top boxes
- Car cleaners

Losing weight on a 'program'

Can shakes, soups and supplements replace real food?

Beware the traps of cashback

Should you swap HRT for alternative therapies?

Premium yoghurt – creamy as well as low fat

Car insurance companies compared

143 PRODUCTS RATED!

Plus: Save money with our report on prescription drugs and their generic equivalents

Contents

News

04 Consumer news
- + Security and mobile phone dumps
- + No-deposit home loans on way out
- + Retailer struck off GreenPower
- + Increased co-payments for medicines
- + TV energy labels
- + Beware bargain appliances
- + Dangers of CFL bulbs.

08 Product news
- + Benchtop oven
- + Indoor garden
- + Cots – safety test.

Features

12 Losing weight on a 'program'
Navigating your way through the growing number of programs.

16 Shadecloths
Our investigation uncovers some disturbing results.

20 Cashback schemes

23 Generic drugs

24 Eco-driving

28 Gourmet yoghurt

30 HRT and alternatives

34 Car insurance

Information

10 Letters and emails
Excess packaging; Buy BankWest; Coles Online; The power of CHOICE.

64 Recalls and bans

65 Campaigns
- + Greenwash: One year on
- + Consolidating lost superannuation.

67 Index

68 Hard word

Subscribers' helpline call 02 9577 3399 **Email** ausconsumer@choice.com.au

"CHOICE it" before you buy it

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Because we pay full price for the products we test, we can remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry – our only aim is to give consumers the best possible information about buying products and services. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is funded by subscriptions to our magazines and CHOICE Online, and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers.

We have laboratories in Marrickville, Sydney, that test everything from juicers to plasma TVs, coffee grinders to MP3 players and air conditioners. We test hundreds of products every year. There's no hidden agenda to our testing – we simply road-test products so that consumers like you don't get ripped off. CHOICE ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys.

CHOICE also has staff who research a wide range of consumer services – everything from the financial industry to the organic food business, supermarket practices to drug companies and pharmacies. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

CHOICE has also always campaigned about consumer goods and services that affect your life. We lobby government and regulators on behalf of all consumers in Australia. CHOICE was established in 1959 and is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation.

CHOICE Best Buy CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy CHOICE calls a product a Green Buy if it delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.

CHOICE Video When you see the CHOICE Video icon, you can find more information about that story at www.choice.com.au.

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CHOICE Shopper

Call 1300 360 655. All you need is the model name and number of the product you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number. CHOICE Shopper is available to personal subscribers only.

On test

40 + **Dishwashers** Not all auto-sensing dishwashing programs are created equal.

44 + **Cordless phones** We test the latest answering machine-free models.

48 + **Media players** We guide you through the growing number of hybrid music and video players on the market.

52 + **Vacuum cleaners** Check out which cleaners work best for removing pet hair around the house.

56 + **Kettles** All kettles are noisy, but some are much noisier than others.

59 + **HD set-top boxes** Even the best of the boxes only perform adequately.

60 + **Car cleaners** We review the best way to wash your car while staying kind to the environment.

CHOICEextra.com.au

This is a free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers. It's an index of articles going back to Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs so that you can read many of them immediately. You log in with your subscriber number, which is above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

Comment

More CHOICE for grocery shoppers

CHOICE has been providing consumers with relevant, timely information about supermarket pricing for almost 25 years. That's why the federal government has decided that CHOICE is best placed to develop a new GroceryChoice website (www.grocerychoice.gov.au).

CHOICE takes over the existing federal government site in February, after which time you'll see the CHOICE brand and links to CHOICE advice.

CHOICE will re-launch a completely re-designed GroceryChoice website in July on which we'll deliver more detailed and up-to-date information, and compare different types of grocery baskets. We aim to put power into the hands of consumers so they can share information, swap tips, and report both good specials and dubious practices.

Feedback from the public and our members will be critical in helping us design the best possible GroceryChoice service. You can provide comments at Choice Online (www.choice.com.au) or, from 1 February, through GroceryChoice. We'll also be listening to the supermarket chains and independents to make sure we're across all relevant industry practices, and we'll consult with consumer and welfare groups to find out their views and respond accordingly.

If you've visited CHOICE Online recently you may have had a survey pop up on your screen, asking about features you think would help transform GroceryChoice into the best possible tool for consumers. We'll also be randomly surveying users of GroceryChoice and will pay close attention to all suggestions in our redesign of the site.

CHOICE has been testing and comparing products since 1959. Government funding to deliver GroceryChoice is an opportunity to make use of our expertise to expand the range of useful and relevant services we provide to consumers. As always, we'll continue to stand up as the consumer champion in our product reviews, research articles and consumer advocacy. ■

Anny Friis
Publisher

PERSONAL SECURITY

Phone data used for fraud

Deleting your details from a discarded mobile phone can be surprisingly tricky, leaving consumers exposed to the risk of personal fraud.

Industry experts have warned that smartphones and multifunction devices that store information on the device can pose a security risk.

"Most phones have an internal memory where telephone numbers, appointments, reminders and personal data are stored," says Kumar Radhakrishnan, Senior Vice President, Sims Recycling Solutions. "Even when SIM cards are removed, information remains on the phone that can be detrimental to the owner if the phone ends up in the wrong hands."

Consulting your phone manual and using specialist software can help you properly remove personal data from your handset.

Consumers are advised by experts to wipe all personal data from their mobile phones and remove the SIM card before disposing of the handset in a secure recycling spot.

Radhakrishnan urges people to remove both the SIM and external storage cards and use data encryption, which is available on smartphones such as the BlackBerry. He says that specialist software is needed to properly wipe personal information. "It is important to ensure that the data is sanitised in case owners wish to donate the phone, and that phones are recycled through specialist e-waste recyclers who can guarantee destruction."

The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) runs a free national recycling program, Mobile Muster, which has recycled 3.5 million batteries and handsets in the 10 years the program has been running. The handsets are not refurbished or resold, and are held in secure collection units. The phones are dismantled and components sent offshore and recycled individually.

Chris Althaus, CEO of AMTA, says there are other ways to ensure personal information cannot be retrieved from discarded mobile phones. "Consumers can be confident that provided they follow the manufacturers' advice on company websites and consult their phone manuals, they can wipe clean the memories of their phones and ensure that the data is unusable."

Research conducted by market research organisation Ipsos found that 4% of mobile phones are disposed of in landfill. Of the recyclable components, metals from batteries are reused in household products such as saucepans, while plastics can be repurposed to produce recycled pallets or plastic fence posts, while paper packaging is recycled. Precious metals such as gold and silver from circuit boards are also extracted. ■

CORRECTION TOILET PAPER, NOVEMBER 2008

On page 35, we said "according to a 2005 NSW government study, 400kg of greenhouse gas emissions can be saved for every tonne of toilet paper made from recycled material". This is incorrect and should have read "a 2005 NSW government study found that for every tonne of paper recycled, 400kg of greenhouse gas emissions are saved".

HOME LOANS

No-deposit home loans on the way out

CBA stops offering risky home loans where no deposit is required.

The CBA is no longer offering 100% home loans, instead now offering up to 95% of the value of a property and requiring borrowers to save at least a 5% deposit. Similarly, ANZ now requires a 10% deposit in place of the previous 5%. This means consumers wishing to borrow $400,000 will need to fund their own deposit of at least $40,000 with ANZ and $20,000 with CBA.

However, several other lenders including Westpac, NAB and St George are still offering 100% home loans. CHOICE has previously warned against such loans and welcomes the move toward more prudent lending standards.

While loans requiring less than 20% deposit may enable you to buy a house sooner, they usually come with a catch: mortgage insurance. For a 100% loan of $400,000, mortgage insurance can cost about $12,000, however this insurance is usually not required for a deposit of 20% or more. Mortgage insurance doesn't insure you; it protects the lender if you default on the loan and your home is sold for less than your loan amount.

Saving as much as you can before buying a home will lower the amount of mortgage insurance, or eliminate the need altogether. A bigger deposit will also open up a wider range of lenders and loans to choose from.

For more information about government subsidies that can help you save, check out our First Home Saver Accounts story in *CHOICE*, December 2008/January 2009. ■

RENEWABLE ENERGY

GreenPower™
Accredited Renewable Energy

GreenPower retailer struck off

Greenswitch has lost its GreenPower accreditation for failing to show that it provided the renewable energy its customers paid for.

Renewable energy retailer Greenswitch has been struck off the GreenPower accreditation scheme for failing to provide evidence that money paid by customers to the organisation was used to purchase renewable energy. The Department of Water and Energy (DWE), the manager of the national GreenPower Program, confirmed that despite accepting payments from consumers, the company could not produce evidence that the corresponding renewable energy purchases for 2007 were made and subsequently surrendered.

Despite being terminated from the GreenPower initiative in September 2008, Greenswitch continued to claim to sell "100% accredited GreenPower" and display the accreditation scheme's logo on its website. CHOICE was able to purchase renewable energy from Greenswitch in late November 2008, months after its authorisation to sell GreenPower was revoked. The company, a business unit of the not-for-profit organisation Global Green Plan, said only one sale has been made since the expiry of accreditation and that a refund will be offered. Greenswitch cited "technical problems" as the cause of its website's false statement of accreditation until December 2008. It also claims to have "recently made a decision not to renew accreditation".

DWE says Greenswitch is legally obliged to compensate consumers who paid for renewable energy that was never purchased and is receiving legal advice in relation to consumers' compensation entitlements. GreenPower's last quarterly report for 2007 shows Greenswitch had 245 residential and 52 business customers, but DWE doesn't know how many sales were made – the company did not submit 2007 annual audit information.

Greenswitch argues it has been surrendering Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) to the Renewable Energy Regulator itself. The company did not respond to CHOICE's request for figures detailing how many RECs had been surrendered and whether they matched sales. DWE maintains that the steps Greenswitch took were insufficient for compliance with the scheme. "When it became clear that Greenswitch was not going to comply with its obligations, we terminated the company's accreditation," says DWE. "We called on the company to stop selling our product and advertising it on their website. When this didn't happen we initiated legal action."

DWE is keen to reassure GreenPower's 817,000 residential and 32,000 business customers that this example of non-compliance is a one-off. "It's the first time in the program's 10 years that we've had a non-compliant company. That's a pretty good record."

HEALTH

Higher medicine costs penalise the poor

Low-income earners and welfare recipients have been hit hardest by increased co-payments for prescription medicine.

Increased co-payments for medicines have led to decreased use of certain medicines, with welfare beneficiaries, including aged and disability pensioners, and other low-income earners choosing to go without important medicines.

Academic research, headed by Anna Hynd of the Sax Institute and published at the end of 2008, compared the number of prescriptions dispensed in the years before and after a 24% increase in the prescription medicine co-payment in January 2005. The co-payment, which is the amount consumers pay for medicines subsidised by the government through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, rose from $3.70 to $4.60 for concessional users and $23.10 to $28.60 for general users. Safety net thresholds have also increased, requiring spending on two additional prescriptions each year before it kicks in.

While a rise of less than one dollar may seem small, it's had a noticeable effect on the number of prescriptions being filled, with low-income community members choosing to forego certain medicines. The greatest drop was for medicines prescribed for chronic but asymptomatic conditions, such as anti-platelet medicine (to prevent blood clots), osteoporosis treatments, combination (prevention and symptom control) asthma medicines and proton-pump inhibitors (used to treat gastro-oesophageal reflux). While some of these can be replaced by over-the-counter medicines, it's unclear to what extent this has occurred.

International studies have shown an increase in hospital attendances and admissions following decreases in medication use due to co-payment increases, and Australian researchers urge "a cautious approach to future policy changes which increase cost sharing by patients".

Research shows a rise in hospital attendance and admissions following patient co-payment increases.

ENVIRONMENT

TVs get energy labels

There's good news with the first TV energy label, but CHOICE hopes the scheme will spur manufacturers to reduce energy use across the board.

By 2020 it is estimated energy use attributable to TVs will more than double the 2005 estimate of 100W per household.

Sharp has recently released a 94cm LCD TV, the LC-37D85X, with an energy label – the first of many to appear since the federal government mandated that all TVs must have energy ratings by April 2009 and any with a one-star rating or less will be banned from sale after October this year.

Labelling schemes are only useful if the information on them is accurate and easy to understand. CHOICE is happy to report that the LC-37D85X performed almost exactly as described on its energy label, but at three stars there's still room for improvement. The TV uses about 142 watts, which is what we'd expect for a screen of this size and resolution. Our previous TV energy testing suggests that higher resolution is aligned with higher energy use, but hopefully manufacturers will now have a greater incentive to find ways to reduce energy use across the board.

The TV energy labels work in much the same way as energy labels for washing machines and refrigerators.

- More stars means greater efficiency.
- If the TV gets six stars or less it has this label (right).
- TVs with seven or more stars get an extra star panel on top.
- The most important factor is the actual energy used, which is calculated based on 10 hours use per day over 365 days. This includes energy used when the TV is on standby during the other 14 hours of the day.
- These figures are based on the TV being in its "Home/Normal picture mode" setting. Where possible, by reducing the brightness and backlight intensity, you may be able to reduce the television's power usage even further.

The more stars the more energy efficient
ENERGY RATING
A joint government and industry television program
Energy Rating Estimate
XXXX
kWh per year
Compare all models at www.energyrating.gov.au

In Australia, energy use attributable to TVs and associated products is on the increase and is estimated to be more than double the 2005 estimate of 100W per household by 2020. Minimum energy performance standards, so-called MEPS, are one way to help keep this increase in check.

We'll be energy testing every TV we purchase, checking to make sure they have accurate labels you can trust. ■

SAFETY

Beware a bargain heater

Consumers should be aware of the dangers of buying a "bargain" appliance, particularly when the little-known brand then goes bust.

A CHOICE staff member recently had a scary experience with a fan heater, a cheap brand bought from a major retailer. Used for only 15 minutes a day to heat a bathroom, it had been on for about 10 minutes when the smoke detector sounded. Upon investigation, the staff member found the fan heater literally melting before her eyes, and the toxic burning plastic causing an overwhelming smell.

She decided to follow it up with the relevant authority to see if a recall was required – in NSW, the Electrical Product Safety Department of the Office of Fair Trading. She discovered there had already been some complaints about this brand of heater, but unfortunately the company had gone into administration.

The various state electrical safety authorities are, however, keen to hear from people who have experienced safety issues with electrical appliances. Too often people may just decide an appliance was cheap and throw it away, but if enough people choose instead to raise the alarm, an investigation can ensue.

Electrical regulators are considering changes to the Australian standard for fan heaters, by making it compulsory for them to have metal grilles instead of plastic, hence limiting the risk of the plastic becoming heat affected. If you're on the hunt for a heater for next winter, look for a metal grille and check for an Australian approval number or mark, which often appears on a sticker on the appliance.

To report a dodgy electrical appliance, contact the relevant authority in your state.

- **ACT** ACT Planning and Land Authority Construction Occupations Section, 02 6207 1923.
- **NSW** NSW Office of Fair Trading, Energy and Utilities Unit, 13 32 20.
- **NT** Department of Infrastructure Electrical Safety Regulator, 08 8999 5511.
- **Queensland** Department of Employment and Industrial Relations Electrical Safety Office, 1800 665 662.
- **SA** Department of Transport, Energy and Infrastructure, Office of the Technical Regulator, 08 8226 5516.
- **Tasmania** Electricity Safety and Standards, 03 6233 7657.
- **Victoria** Energy Safe Victoria, 03 9203 9700.
- **WA** Department of Employment and Consumer Protection, Energy Safety Division, 1800 678 198. ■

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Don't get too close to these CFLs

CFL bulbs save energy but may also pose a UV radiation risk.

Energy-saving compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs have come under the spotlight for potential adverse health effects as inefficient incandescent light bulbs are phased out. Research by the British Health Protection Agency (HPA) has revealed some CFLs can emit ultraviolet radiation above the recognised safety limits.

HPA investigated 53 compact fluorescent bulbs after patient groups, including people with the photosensitive skin disease lupus, raised concerns about the lamps. Nine (or 17%) were found to emit high levels of UV radiation, the highest of which were recorded at close proximity (2cm from the bulb), equivalent to being outside in the UK on a sunny summer's day.

Don't use open (single envelope) CFLs (like the one pictured above left) for prolonged close work. Encapsulated (double envelope) CFLs (above right), which look similar to traditional light bulbs, pose no problem as any UV radiation is absorbed by the outer glass container.

The agency warned people who work close to these CFL bulbs, such as jewellers or mechanics, to avoid spending more than an hour at a time within 30cm of such lamps, and use encapsulated light bulbs instead. "This is precautionary advice and people should not be thinking of removing these light bulbs from their homes," says Justin McCraken, HPA chief executive.

The Australian lighting industry and government authorities are aware of the higher UV emissions from CFLs. However, a spokesperson from the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts said that "(UV) emissions should not be significant when the CFLs are installed in ceiling fittings and, if necessary, could be absorbed easily by appropriate filters in desk or bed lamp fittings". The department has commissioned tests on a range of lighting products, including an evaluation of UV emissions, and together with other relevant departments continues to monitor potential health effects.

Bryan Douglas, CEO of the Lighting Council Australia, said all common household and office lamps emit UV radiation, but in better quality CFLs this is contained by the choice of glass tube and coating.

CEO of Cancer Council Australia, Professor Ian Olver, agrees that highly sun-sensitive people should avoid reading lamps at close proximity. However, for the vast majority of Australians, the risk is very low. "Spending time in the midday summer sun is far more of a consideration in terms of skin cancer risk." ■

CAN YOU HELP US RESPOND TO SUPER'S SHOCKING YEAR?

2008 was the worst year on record for superannuation returns, leaving a lot of people unsure about whether their investment is in the best fund. CHOICE will be investigating your questions and concerns for an upcoming report; go to www.choice.com.au/super or email money@choice.com.au to tell us what you'd like to know.

In brief

Coke sued for Shonky Vitamin claims

Having received a CHOICE Shonky award last November, Coca-Cola is now being sued by the US Centre for Science in the Public Interest for making "deceptive and unsubstantiated claims" about its Vitaminwater beverages. Nutritionists say the eight teaspoons of sugar in each bottle does more harm than any advertised benefit of the vitamins.

Free reverse mortgage information

A free, independent advice service covering all aspects of reverse mortgages and equity release loans is available from the National Information Centre on Retirement Investments (NICRI). For access to the Equity Release/ Reverse Mortgage Information Service, go to www.nicri.org.au and follow the links, or call 1800 020 110.

Watching the watchdogs

Not one of the 12 key federal, state or territory consumer protection agencies achieved a "good" performance level in CHOICE's *Good Practice in Consumer Protection Enforcement* report. Research found inconsistent reporting by regulators made it hard to gauge how well government agencies are performing. CHOICE says the rankings should encourage regulators to lift their game.

BENCHTOP OVEN

Cooking at warp speed

Cooking with infrared waves, a halogen light and turbo fan sounds out of this world, but can it really deliver scrumptious meals in a flash?

The Danoz Flavorwave Oven Turbo claims to cook healthy meals, including frozen food, up to three times faster than ordinary methods, with no defrosting or preheating required. It cooks using a halogen light to brown the food, infrared waves to cook from the inside out, and a convection fan for even heating.

To put this claim to the test we cooked two whole chickens – one frozen, the other fresh from the fridge. We also cooked a frozen pizza, reheated a quiche and baked a dark, rich fudge cake.

The frozen chicken was roasted to perfection. The skin was crisp and golden brown and the flesh juicy and tender. The only downside was that the times given in the recipe book and reference guide were inaccurate and contradictory, and the weights given in pounds. In our first frozen chicken test the temperature and time specified in the reference guide were far too hot and too long, so the chicken burnt. However, following the recipe book we got an excellent result, but the chook needed an extra 30 minutes to cook from frozen.

We also got excellent results for roasting a chicken straight from the fridge, along with potatoes. For larger foods and layered cooking you'll need the extender ring that raises the lid and element, available at extra cost, otherwise the food on the top layer will be too close to the element and may burn.

The Flavorwave was less effective at cooking a frozen pizza and reheating a quiche. There is no element at the bottom so it couldn't get the pastry bases nice and crisp, while the toppings and filling were unevenly browned and a little overcooked. You may get a better result if you buy the optional pizza browning tray. The fudge cake was poorly done, with the top overcooked and the bottom and centre uncooked.

Being about the size of a toaster oven, the Flavorwave takes up a sizeable amount of bench space, but is easy to use and clean, featuring both a self-clean setting and dishwasher-safe glass bowl. The bowl and lid become very hot, so caution is required. The lid is heavy but easy to place safely in the rack attached to the side of the bowl holder.

CHOICE VERDICT

The Flavorwave won't necessarily save much time; it certainly didn't cook our test foods three times faster as claimed. It didn't cook pastries, pizza and cake well either (but may work better with the optional extras). However, it can cook from frozen, does not require preheating, and roasts a deliciously crisp and juicy chicken that is to die for. ■

DANOZ Flavorwave Oven Turbo

Price $200 (plus $29.95 P&H if ordering online)
Dimensions (H x W x D) 35cm x 41cm x 33cm
Contact www.danoz.com.au

AEROGARDEN

No soil, no toil

But high-tech gardeners count the cost of convenience.

AEROGARDEN

Price $280
Contact www.aerogarden.com.au, or www.globalshopdirect.com.au

Billed as the world's first self-contained indoor garden appliance, Aerogarden promises dirt-free and virtually set-and-forget produce. The makers claim its "NASA-tested aeroponic technology" produces faster, healthier and more nutritious plants, all year round.

The Aerogarden counter-top unit holds seven special seed pods at a time and uses two "daylight" compact fluorescent "grow bulbs". The idea is that you just add the pre-seeded pods, organic nutrient tablets and water, then turn it on and watch your plants sprout and grow.

The "smart" part of the system is how it adjusts nutrient levels and water flow for optimum growth and indicates when to add more. The timed lamps run about 16 hours a day, depending on plant type, but it's claimed the whole system consumes less than a 60W light bulb. The lamp hood can be raised progressively to accommodate the growing garden.

There's a limited selection of herbs, salad greens, cherry tomatoes, chilli peppers and flowers available in readymade pod packs, or a do-it-yourself kit for other seed types.

And what is the cost of "smart" gardening? Rounded up, the standard Aerogarden (including herb pods, nutrients and grow bulbs) set us back $250 (plus $30 P&H). Extra pod sets are $30, again plus $5 P&H – but the postage cost is the same per set even if you order multiples. Replacing the grow bulb twin-pack at the recommended six months costs $20 plus $10 P&H, because they're only available by phone order locally.

So, in the first year, that's $280 for the unit and $30 for extra bulbs, plus whatever additional seeds you want at $35 a kit – not to mention roughly $60 in annual electricity costs. Somehow, unless money's no object, "smart" gardening doesn't seem quite so smart anymore.

CHOICE VERDICT

The Aerogarden, while far more expensive than an everyday indoor herb garden kit, is ideal if you want a small, clean, high-tech indoor garden all year round. ■

COTS

Sleep safely

Eight out of 10 cots passed all our safety tests.

We assessed the following cots against selected clauses from the Australian/New Zealand Standard for cots, AS/NZS 2172:2003, looking at key safety aspects as well as labelling and instructions.

- Childcare Harbour XT
- Delta Jasmine
- Grotime C34 Babe
- IKEA Leksvik
- Kingparrot Scout
- Love N Care Classic
- Mother's Choice Bellevue
- Regent Nu Gembrooke
- Sunbury Dreamtime C102
- Swallow Jessie

Only two of the 10 cots had a safety failure – a much better result than in some of our previous cot tests. Some failed labelling and instruction requirements, but these are only minor failures.

Childcare Harbour XT

CHOICE VERDICT

What to buy

These models passed all our safety tests and each converts to a junior bed.

Childcare Harbour XT 091132-007 $350

Kingparrot Scout $470

Love N Care Classic $400

Sunbury Dreamtime C102 $525

Also recommended

These also passed our safety tests, but have some niggling bad points.

Grotime C34 Babe $349

- Incorrect mattress information and slippery dropside buttons.

IKEA Leksvik $349

- No dropside and tedious to assemble.

Regent Nu Gembrooke $499

- Dropside doesn't operate smoothly.

Swallow Jessie $289

- Protruding dropside lever.

Not recommended

These failed safety tests. The risk of these failures causing an incident or injury may be small, but safety failures of any kind are nevertheless unacceptable.

Delta Jasmine $550

- This has a protrusion hazard and a finger trap. The manufacturer advised this cot is certified to the A/NZ Standard; the problems we found may be due to manufacturing variations.

Mother's Choice Bellevue $299

- This failed the depth test: when using the maximum recommended mattress (150mm thick) the distance from mattress top to the top of the dropside when raised is too little, increasing the chance a child in the cot could climb or fall out. The manufacturer disagreed with our findings regarding the safety failure, but said the information labelling has been corrected.

EXTENDING THE LIFE OF A COT

It's not always a good idea to reuse a secondhand cot. The mandatory cot standard has only applied since 1998, and our tests show that not every cot sold since then meets the standard. Always first check that the old cot is safe and buy a new, correctly fitting mattress, as the old one may create a SIDS risk if too soft, or it could just be dirty. Some newer cots transform to a junior bed simply by removing the sides. Others need the addition of bed rails at the sides for strength, which is fine so long as the mattress is firm and fits snugly against the rails and bed ends so there are no gaps (which are suffocation hazards). By converting the cot to a bed, you'll get a few more years' use from it.

Visit our website, www.choice.com.au, for advice on what to look for when buying a cot.

Coming

Espresso machines

Espresso machines allow you to be a barista in the privacy of your own kitchen, but do they make as good a cuppa as your favourite local coffee house? Our team of experts compares the latest automatic models.

106cm TVs

The screen may be bigger but the sound certainly isn't better; we discovered that most of these TVs were let down by their inbuilt sound function. We tell you which scored best for sound and which should be joined in marriage with a separate system.

Digital radio

Analogue radio is destined to go the way of its TV cousin as digital radio begins broadcasting across the airwaves later in the year. We preview the changes you can expect with the digital radio revolution.

Email or write — we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Excess packaging

I've just read your article on reducing plastic bag use (*CHOICE*, November 2008) and wholeheartedly agree that a levy should be imposed as a matter of urgency. However, I am becoming exceedingly frustrated at the ever-growing mountain of other packaging we seem to accumulate. I believe state and federal governments need to act on this. If I buy a pack of 10 teabags, they are packed in a cardboard box, which is wrapped in cellophane. Unwrap that and the teabags are then sealed in a foil bag – two more pieces of useless packaging. And consider the amount of packaging around biscuits. Oh, for the days when we purchased them loose in a brown paper bag and could mix-and-match our choice.

If manufacturers insist on so much packaging they should at least be forced to make it recyclable.

Anne Stubbings, via email

CHOICE says *We agree manufacturers should be responsible for the environmental impact of their product at every stage of its lifecycle – from cradle to grave. The National Packaging Covenant (NPC) aims to provide more effective management of used packaging based on the principles of shared responsibility. The covenant is a voluntary initiative that commits signatories to a national recycling target of 65% for packaging and no further increases in packaging waste disposed to landfill by the end of 2010.*

Unfortunately, despite recycling increasing by 56% since 2005 and packaging to landfill decreasing 19% on 2003 levels, overall waste has continued to increase by 28% between 2003 and 2007. The Total Environment Centre, which sits on the NPC Council, believes the whole covenant needs "surgery" – and that any increase in recycling is due to action by residents and local councils rather than NPC signatories. CHOICE welcomes the federal Environment Minister's call for a national waste policy to be established which would aim to deal with waste in a complete way.

Billionaires needed

I'd like to congratulate CHOICE on its recent campaign to advertise for an alternative bidder for BankWest. The level of market power enjoyed by the big four retail banks has had a significant effect on the range of products offered to Australian consumers. As an NAB customer of 30 years' standing I was told last year I could not renew a fixed interest mortgage loan, despite the number of current fixed interest loans then available from the NAB – only variable interest would be offered at the expiry of the current term. I approached BankWest and was offered a five-year fixed interest loan subject to the normal lending criteria (at a marginally lower rate than NAB). This was finalised.

My experience has been that as the banks get bigger they are no longer interested in catering for those who fall outside the mainstream retail bank customer profile. Alternatively, the smaller banks and credit unions recognise that catering to the needs of customers who fall outside the standard profile is one of the few ways they can gain customers. The argument that Australia must have big banks to compete on the world stage must surely now be finally discredited.

Stephan, via email

CHOICE says *Thanks for your support. Our Buy BankWest campaign has made headlines in newspapers around Australia, as well as online and in the blogosphere. We've had*

Wanted:
$2.6 billion
to give BankWest its smile back.
It's not much really. Not for a bank that's been one hot challenger to the Big Four. Can you buy BankWest? Know someone who can?
CALL (OR) 9577 2313
choice

tremendous response from CHOICE members and customers of all banks who tell us that real competition is essential for keeping big banks on their toes and playing fair.

Even BankWest has gone on the record to say it "agrees with the CHOICE campaign" and wants to remain "competitive" and a "challenger brand". Our online poll revealed 49% of our readers agree any non-Big Four bank would make a better buyer than the Commonwealth Bank – even Richard Branson and Bill Gates got a mention!

Many of you also blogged, phoned and wrote emails to the ACCC urging them to block the merger. We'll continue to do whatever we can to champion better competition in banking. Be sure to check online at www.choice.com.au to keep up to date with how the situation progresses.

Convenience versus cost

I'm a working mum who was keen to embrace online shopping for the weekly grocery drudge. When Coles announced it was finally operational in Queensland, I registered and ordered. I was very pleased with the initial order, delivered on time in a refrigerated van.

I was going to make another online order, but due to a change in routine shopped in person at a different Coles store, using

the same list. I was shocked to discover just about every item was at least 20c to 30c cheaper in the store compared with online. My trolley of items would have cost me $120.85 ordering online, but shopping in person for the same trolley came to $98.35 – a saving of $22.50. This didn't include the delivery cost as it was offered free as part of a promotion. Delivery costs normally range from $5-$15, depending on delivery times.

Even advertised specials are not the same for Coles Online. I ordered one block of 250g chocolate for $5.11 in my online list. Imagine my surprise to discover the local store had the same product on special, two blocks for $6 – an in-store saving of over $2.

Consumers should be aware that Coles Online is a separate entity from Coles and the specials and list prices are totally unrelated.
Maria McCamley – via email

CHOICE says *A spokesperson for Coles Online told us that while the online service is designed to be a convenience for busy shoppers, such as working parents, the prices are different from what might be found at your local Coles store.*

Coles says its online service aims to match average store prices across a wide range of items, such as meat, fruit and vegetables, bread and fresh milk, but online prices may be higher than those listed in a particular Coles store on these and other items. While it offers catalogue specials, currently it doesn't offer online customers "two for one" specials. Any price difference reflects the fact that Coles Online uses dedicated in-store shoppers to hand-collate a customer's order. So despite the convenience, this service does come at an extra cost.

Thumbs up!

- Michael Bradburn would like to thank Omega Appliances, who arranged to cover the cost of repairs to his Smeg oven even though it was out of warranty.
- Matthew Platt would like to thank Dyson vacuum cleaners. When the turbo head on his cleaner stopped working he contacted the company who sent him a new one free of charge even though the machine was out of warranty.
- Isobel Davison wants to give Rinnai a big thumbs up for its handling of her complaint about her gas heater and subsequent repair despite it being out of warranty.
- Kirsty Tracy would like to thank Sleep Easy for repairing her 18-month-old baby monitor within a few days and returning it free of charge, fully functioning and with a spare battery pack.

Address your letters to ***Thumbs up!*** *at the address below.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

The power of choice

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAMMY

I have been a *CHOICE* subscriber (on and off) for more than six years and would like to say thank you for a wonderfully informative forum in which I can purchase goods without having to do any of the legwork or research associated with purchasing new items.

When we built our home, we purchased the dishwasher, washing machine, fridge and DVD player on your recommendations. Since then it's been everything from car tyres to iPods to our latest purchase, an LCD TV. *CHOICE* magazine is a fantastic product. It's so empowering to be informed *before* purchasing an item, so the salesperson has little chance of selling you something you're not interested in or a different brand based on what commission they'll receive. Power to the people! Keep up the good work.
Tammy Green, via email

To thank you for taking the time to write to us, CHOICE awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the "Letter of the month". This month's winner receives *How to Clean Practically Anything*, or any other book of her choice from the list on www.choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.

Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to: Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204

Losing weight on a 'program'

Pharmacies are getting into the weight loss business, but how do these diet plans weigh up? Our CHOICE investigation reveals some serious shortcomings.

nutshell

- Pharmacy diet plans may help to shed extra kilos quickly, but most fail to deal effectively with the complex broader issues around weight loss.
- CHOICE cannot recommend these programs until consultants improve their training and move beyond the "one-size-fits-all" approach.

Australia has a seriously escalating obesity problem. In the past 20 years the number of people with weight problems has doubled; about 60% of Australian adults are overweight or obese, and we're on track to reach 70% by 2010.

What everyone is looking for is a quick, easy, personalised and private solution – which is why pharmacy-based diet programs appeal. There's no fronting up for group counselling or public weigh-ins; most use meal replacements that sound like an easy calorie-counting-free option; and the speed at which some claim you can lose weight effortlessly is counted in weeks, not months or years.

Our findings confirm these diet plans, if followed closely, will certainly shed the kilos in record time, but are they safe and are customers properly assessed and monitored by the pharmacies? Do these fast-track diet plans address the real issues at the root of the weight problem? And is it the pharmacies themselves who end up profiting the most?

Did you know?

What is ketosis? When your body doesn't get enough carbohydrates, it produces ketones from body fat, which it burns instead of carbohydrates to produce energy. Some people experience ketosis when they eat fewer than 100g of carbohydrates a day; once carbohydrates are at 50g most people will experience it. Some organs of your body, such as the brain and red blood cells, need glucose for energy, and if you don't eat enough carbohydrates to supply them, your body will break down protein – from your muscles if you're not eating enough protein – as an energy source for these organs.

What are the benefits? Quick initial weight loss (mainly due to fluid loss) may increase your motivation. Some people claim the fluid loss also reduces feelings of bloating. Ketosis can also help make you feel less hungry.

And the downsides? Some undesirable side-effects are mild dehydration, poor athletic performance, nausea, bad breath, risk of blood pressure problems, an increased risk of osteoporosis and muscle and blood vessel damage. It may also make concentrating on mental tasks more difficult.

CHOICE goes undercover

To anonymously assess these programs CHOICE sent three overweight people to a selection of pharmacies offering seven different diet programs, and asked a panel of experts to assess our findings (see Meet the Experts, below right).

All the pharmacy plans involve a weekly visit to your pharmacy consultant and a diet that restricts carbohydrates to some extent. All except Ultra Lite use meal replacements to keep your intake in check. The basics of each program are shown in the table, page 14.

The least you might expect on your first visit is for your consultation and weigh-in to take place in a private area away from other shoppers. But in five of our 20 consultations, privacy was not considered: for example, a MediTrim consultant used an open area near the pharmacist; one Xndo consultation took place behind a screen next to shelves where shoppers were browsing; and one Dr Tim's Success consultant interviewed our shadow shopper at the pharmacy counter where other people were being served.

On average, the first consultation was 40 minutes, however they ranged from a fairly brief 20 minutes for Dr Tim's Success to about 80 minutes for Ultra Lite. Most pharmacies gave our shoppers the name of a person to keep in touch with and return to for weigh-ins, and suggested weekly follow-up visits.

Most consultations involved their weight being measured, and about three-quarters checked waist circumference, which is useful for getting an overall picture and measuring improvements. Some programs used bio-impedance scales (see Body Fat Scales, *CHOICE* October 2005 or www.choice.com.au) to assess factors such as body fat and metabolic rate. Our panel thought these assessment methods were generally good, however they were concerned about the limited training consultants received in order to correctly interpret them (see Our 'Highly Trained' Consultants, opposite).

Who will pharmacies accept?

Our experts agreed all the program consultants asked our shadow shoppers enough about their health to cover themselves but, at too many pharmacies, little more. Our shadow shoppers were asked about current medical conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, and any medications they were taking.

However, the majority of consultants didn't assess family medical history, current exercise levels, usual diet and lifestyle, alcohol intake and previous weight loss methods. No program asked our shadow shoppers all of these important background questions, although Xndo did best, covering more of these issues than the other programs. But some (Kate Morgan, Betty Baxter and two Tony Ferguson consultants) only asked the basics.

Most claim to screen for people with known risk factors. Those with diabetes must get their GP's agreement, for example. However, this is no guarantee of their doctor's ongoing input. Most programs rightfully said they wouldn't accept pregnant or breastfeeding women (some would only if their GP recommended it), but Tony Ferguson and Ultra Lite accept some children. Our experts described this as "disgraceful and irresponsible", as they consider these diet strategies inappropriate for children.

The experts are concerned that people who are not overweight are eligible to go on most of the diets. Of the programs that told us about their practices, only Betty Baxter and Dr Tim's Success excluded people of normal, healthy weight from participating. Betty Baxter allows people with a normal body mass index (BMI) to join only if they have other measures that suggest they need to lose weight, such as high body fat or waist measurement. Dr Tim's Success is the only program limited to people who are overweight or obese.

Our 'highly trained' consultants

"Dedicated support staff"; "our trained consultants will always be available", "trained pharmacy consultants", "fully trained … program partners". Despite the rhetoric, four of the programs provide pharmacy consultants with just three to six hours' basic training. Of the remainder, MediTrim, Tony Ferguson, Ultra Lite and Xndo offer two-day basic training, while only Dr Tim's Success, Tony Ferguson, Ultra Lite and Xndo told us they require consultants to pass a test, which our experts supported. Ongoing training is also variable, ranging from none to an additional 16 hours per year. Only three companies volunteered details of what their training covered and in all cases some of the precious time covered "marketing techniques", "selling tips" or "overcoming objections".

Our experts regard the level of training as grossly inadequate to deal effectively with the complex issues surrounding weight loss. Behavioural counselling – helping people understand why they eat as they do and how to help them make permanent changes – was largely overlooked in the programs' simplified, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Are the diets nutritionally OK?

Most programs rely on limiting carbohydrates and restricting kilojoules to put the dieter into a state of ketosis (see Did You Know?, page 12). However, our experts have several issues with the nutrition profiles of the diets. >

CHOICE's experts are concerned that even people who are not overweight are eligible to go on most of the diets offered.

CHOICE ONLINE

See our food quizzes and healthy eating tools at www.choice.com.au/food.

Meet the experts

Thanks to our expert panel who digested many kilos of information about the programs to help us assess each one.

Susie Burrell

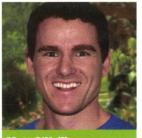
Susie is an accredited practising dietitian who specialises in obesity. She holds an honours degree in psychology and is the specialist obesity dietitian at The Children's Hospital at Westmead in Sydney. She is a spokesperson for the Dietitians' Association of Australia.

David Cameron-Smith

David is Associate Professor and course co-ordinator of Food Science and Nutrition at Deakin University and current chair of the Victorian Division of the Nutrition Society of Australia.

Melanie McGrice

Melanie is an accredited practising dietitian specialising in obesity, with a particular interest in weight-loss surgery. She is a spokesperson for the Dietitians' Association of Australia.



Matt O'Neill

Matt is an accredited practising dietitian and exercise physiologist specialising in weight management. He is the founder of SmartShape and runs training courses on nutrition and weight loss for health and fitness professionals.

Dr Rosemary Stanton OAM

Rosemary is a well-known and widely respected nutritionist. She is the author of numerous scientific papers, is associated with several universities and sits on many prestigious scientific committees.

- Most are around 4000kJ per day in the main weight-loss stage. Only AlphaSlim, Betty Baxter and Kate Morgan come close to 5000kJ per day, which is regarded as the minimum to get all your necessary micronutrients. At less than 5000kJ – even with added supplements – levels of other nutrients and beneficial food chemicals such as phytochemicals can be compromised. Decreases in metabolic rate are also a risk, as the body tries to protect itself against starvation. Since we assessed the diets Tony Ferguson has changed its program to include an option that increases the energy to 5000kJ per day and contains more carbohydrates.
- Some of the programs contain about 100 grams of carbohydrates per day; several contain much less. Too little will result in ketosis and can also risk the loss of muscle rather than fat. Although in some cases eating sufficient protein can help protect muscle, it's a fine balancing act as too much protein can also cause problems.
- All the diets fall short on fibre in the weight-loss phase (except Betty Baxter which adds it to the meal replacements). Some are low even when a fibre supplement is included – too little fibre can cause constipation.
- To keep the carbohydrates low, some programs either ban or severely limit cereal foods, including wholegrains, which are proven to have long-term health benefits, such as reducing the risk of some cancers and heart disease.
- MediTrim and Xndo replace meals with drinks that don't meet the Australian standard for meal replacements, but both are careful not to call their drinks meal replacements.
- The only program to get the nutritional thumbs-up from our experts is Betty Baxter, which has a reasonable amount of kilojoules, enough carbohydrates to keep ketosis in check and allows low-GI wholegrain carbs even in the early stages.

The big upsell

Apart from the cost of the program and meal replacements where they're used, most programs also include supplements which add to the pharmacy's bottom line.

Multivitamin and mineral supplement

Most programs recommend these, which the pharmacy conveniently sells (program-branded or otherwise). Only Dr Tim's Success doesn't require you to buy any additional

PRODUCT	FEATURES			CONSULTANTS' TRAINING		
Program (in alphabetical order)	**Meal replacements**	**Meets Australian meal replacement standard**	**Claimed weight-loss/average time on program**	**Initial**	**Ongoing**	**Contact**
AlphaSlim Pharmacy Weight Loss (A)	Two per day, plus a main meal at night and fruit for snacks. A "free day" is introduced after four weeks	Yes (C)	0.5kg to 1kg per week/until weight lost	Three hours	"As scheduled or required"	alphaslim.com.au
Betty Baxter Complete Weight Management	Two per day, plus a main meal at night and snacks	Yes	Maximum 1kg per week/six to eight weeks (at a time)	Four hours	Nine to 16 hours per year	bettybaxter.com.au
Dr Tim's Success	Two per day, plus a main meal at night (fruit for snacks after two weeks)	Yes	Up to 6kg (women), 9kg (men) over four week/12 weeks	Three hours	Within first few months, four to six hours; two-hour refresher training available. Online training is also available "at any time"	drtimssuccess.com.a
Kate Morgan Weight Loss	Two per day, plus a main meal at night and fruit for snacks	Yes (D)	1kg per week/12 to 16 weeks	Six hours	No structured program; "experienced staff require little ongoing training"	katemorgan.com.au
MediTrim (B)	Three per day initially, then two per day plus a main meal at night and fruit/nuts for snacks	No (E)	1kg to 2kg per week; time on program not known	Two days	Not known	meditrim.com.au
Tony Ferguson Weightloss	Two per day, plus a main meal at night and fruit for snacks	Yes	No claims on weight loss/five weeks (at a time)	Two days	Four-hour training on maintenance diet; advanced/master practitioner training from 2009	tonyferguson.com
Ultra Lite Weight Management	None. Based on counting and limiting carbohydrate content using ordinary foods	na	10kg/five-week program; 15kg to 20kg/10-week program	Two days	Recommend refresher training once per year	ultralite.com.au
Xndo Weight Control System	Two per day, plus a main meal at night and fruit for snacks. There is also a non-meal replacement option	No (E)	0.5kg to 1kg per week/until weight lost	Two days	"Regular advanced training courses"	xndo.com.au

supplements to meet vitamin and mineral needs. However, one of our shadow shoppers was sold three pharmacy-packaged vitamin and herbal supplements as part of their Dr Tim's Success starter kit.

The fact so much of the nutritional intake is from supplements or vitamins added to the meal replacements concerned our panel. Real food is the best way to get vitamins and minerals – not enough is known about the other important components of real food, and taking more of some nutrients than you might need in the form of multiple supplements is not ideal.

Diet pills The most popular diet pill-type supplement with most programs is chromium, which is supposed to reduce sugar cravings. But our experts say the evidence for this is far from convincing.

Fibre supplements are another popular upsell – either program-branded or not – and they're available from the pharmacy. According to the experts and our analysis of the diets, you're likely to need them. The fibre levels of all programs, except Betty Baxter, are too low and constipation is a real possibility.

Flaxseed oil Our experts questioned why several programs suggest daily flaxseed oil as a way of getting sufficient omega-3 fats. Flaxseed oil goes rancid very quickly and can have a most unfavourable fat profile. Other, more stable oils, such as olive oil, would be better.

Other extras Xndo had the most extras on offer – instant coffee, soft drink and cordial at $1.60 per serve. ■

CAN MEAL REPLACEMENTS EVER BE USEFUL?

Doctors and dietitians sometimes use meal replacements in hospitals and clinics to treat obese and very obese people, whose health is seriously at risk. These people usually have health problems, such as heart disease or high-blood pressure, and have failed to lose weight using other approaches. Meal replacements are also commonly used before weight-loss surgery, such as gastric banding. They're most likely to be effective when there's close medical supervision and effective counselling on long-term diet, lifestyle, behavioural and psychological issues. And this is the critical area where our CHOICE shadow shop found the pharmacy-based meal replacement programs fall short.

:OSTS

Membership, diet plan/diary	Ongoing meal replacements per week	Supplements to buy
$29.90	$43.28	Optional multivitamin; fibre supplement; flaxseed/olive/grapeseed oil; chromium supplement
$25.90	$45.15	Multivitamin; flaxseed oil; chromium supplement
$21 (F)	$45.15 (H)	None (J)
$24.95	$45.50	Multivitamin; fibre supplement; chromium supplement
$25	$42.00	MediTrim multivitamin ($24.95/60 tablets); MediTrim Fibre complex ($27.50/500g); MediTrim Balance ($28.50/60 tablets); MediTrim Fat Burner ($34.95/60 tablets); MediTrim Appetite reduce ($34.99/60 tablets); flaxseed oil; apple cider vinegar
$24.95	$45.50	Tony Ferguson branded Simply balanced (multivitamin; $26.95/60 tablets), Simply fibre ($18.40/280g), Simply chromium ($13.80/60 tablets)
$395 (G)	na (G)	Flaxseed oil; apple cider vinegar; urine test strips and potassium supplement (K)
$19.95	$41.86	Xndo branded low joule "snack water" ($15.99 - 16.99/10); low-joule coffee sachets ($18.99/10); lemon tea booster (tea with vitamins and minerals, $39.99 for 30); Xndo Block & Burn ($14.99/week, 15 tablets)

TABLE NOTES

(A) All information from AlphaSlim. AlphaSlim's program details were not made available to us in time to include them in the shadow shop.
(B) All information from MediTrim website and shadow shop – company did not return our survey (but did confirm the data we collected as correct).
(C) Shakes meet standard; soups are low in phosphorus.
(D) Kate Morgan evening meals are not meal replacements.
(E) The company does not specifically claim their products are meal replacements. However, they are used to replace meals.
(F) The starter pack is $66 and includes the first week's shakes, worth $45.
(G) For the five-week program, includes first and then weekly consultations, manual and recipe book, enough vitamin-drink sachets for four sachets per day. Depending on the pharmacy, this cost may or may not include flaxseed oil, apple cider vinegar, urine test strips and a potassium supplement ($47.95 if bought separately); 10-week program is also available.
(H) One shadow shopper was told her weekly visits would cost $5 each, even though the company says they should be free.
(J) No additional supplements are required, according to the company's information; however, one shadow shopper was sold extra herbal and vitamin supplements in the pharmacy.
(K) These may be included in the program price at some pharmacies. Vitamin-drink sachets are included in the cost.

CHOICE verdict

These programs are of obvious financial benefit to the pharmacies, and a constant stream of short-term clients will shift a lot of product off the shelves. Will you lose weight? If you follow them closely, yes. Will the pharmacy setting provide you with your own highly skilled weight-loss advisor? Our experts think not. Considering the inadequate training of consultants, little ability to tailor programs and deal with individual circumstances and habits, as well as the lack of close, qualified supervision, CHOICE does not recommend these programs.

The current regulations and voluntary codes of practice covering weight-loss programs are insufficient. CHOICE wants to see a national accreditation system, including minimum standards for training, covering all programs, consultants and leaders who counsel people on losing weight.

Shady business

That smart new shade sail in your backyard might be providing precious little UV protection.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SIOUNE BOUCHET

nutshell

- The shadecloth installation industry is largely unregulated in Australia. The installer may have little knowledge about the correct method of design and installation to ensure proper protection.
- Some shadecloths are susceptible to stretching, whether through incorrect tensioning during installation, or deterioration. This may reduce their UV protection.

Australians have embraced the outdoors like no other nation, with compact courtyards and rambling backyards readily converted into extensions of our living areas, thanks to synthetic shade. A range of smart shade devices come in trendy styles and vibrant colours, and many offer reassuring claims of maximum ultraviolet radiation (UVR) protection.

CHOICE has found, however, that the UVR rating of the shadecloth is only half the story. The shadecloth industry is largely unregulated and serious knowledge gaps exist in the way these devices should be designed and installed. Ignorance of the level of shade coverage necessary, the choice of materials and where a shade structure should be orientated in relation to the sun may all contribute towards a structure that provides dangerously inadequate protection against the sun.

If the shadecloth is improperly stretched, this could also reduce its stated UVR protection.

WHY SHADE DEVICES FAIL

According to architect John Greenwood, director of the shade audit firm, WebShade, there are a few reasons most shade devices fail.

- The wrong materials are used, such as shade fabric with too low a UV protection level, or even translucent plastic roofing instead of one that is polycarbonate, which offers 99% UVR block.
- The shadecloth structure is not big enough to create shade over the target area.
- Poor planning of where shade is sited, such as not erecting shade where it is needed.

Can you trust the industry?

With the exceptions of Queensland and Victoria, where installers must hold a valid builder's licence, anyone can set themselves up as a shade installer.

Even with a builder's licence, there is no guarantee an installer will have any specific qualifications, experience or advanced knowledge of shade devices and their correct installation. A high-protection shadecloth could be installed in such a way that compromises its stated UV protection.

"There is no formal education process of how to put up a shadecloth, so the only way is to go out there and do it," says John Simmonds, director of Billabong Shades in Victoria. "The problem with this trial-and-error method is that sometimes the error is made and the customer has to pay for it."

Technical aspects of how to design and erect an effective shade sail include making sure the cloth has the right tensile strength to take different wind loads and that the supports are sufficiently stable. Orientation to the sun also matters; there is little use having the shade sheltering your neighbour's barbecue pit.

What's in a shadecloth?

There are two types of shadecloth – knitted and woven. Most for domestic and commercial use are of knitted fabric, each available in several grades, from light to extra heavy. Commercial-grade fabrics generally offer superior protection in terms of UVR block and strength as they are designed for larger spans. Domestic-grade shadecloth is sold at hardware stores (see Domestic and Commercial Knitted Shadecloth Fabrics, page 18), and offer between 50% and 99% UVR protection for both plants and people. Cancer Councils across Australia recommend shade structures have a UVR block of at least 94%.

Whether you're a DIYer sizing up shade fabric off the roll, buying a readymade shadesail from a hardware store or looking at swatches from a shadecloth supplier, check for the shadecloth's UVR rating. A shadecloth with a 98% UVR rating means it blocks 98% of ultraviolet radiation.

"Most people go for colour and cost in choosing shadecloth," says architect John Greenwood, director of shade audit firm WebShade. "From the shade audits we have done, it is obvious there is a huge knowledge gap in the choices people make while buying and installing them."

In the numerous shade audits Greenwood has conducted in NSW, Queensland and New Zealand, he always asks his clients if they know the UVR protection of the shadecloth and the type of material used. "I find it very rare when someone knows the type of material the shade sail they bought is made of and how much UVR block it offers," says Greenwood.

Then there is the added uncertainty of stretching. "The UVR block is the single most important determinant of assessing the degree of protection against sunburn. But when a shadecloth is stretched due to improper installation, its UVR could be lowered," says Christopher Nolan, managing director of Nolan Warehouses, a company that has been installing shade since 1920.

"We simply got a couple of guys to pull a shadecloth in different directions. Some shadecloths open up when stretched and some don't. The key is in how you put it up," says Billabong Shade's John Simmonds.

Tony Watt, director of Queensland-based shadecloth manufacturer Pro-Knit Industries, is also concerned, arguing that shade fabrics should be tested under tension. He asks: "What is the point of stating that a shadecloth has 97% UVR, but when stretched offers a lower protection?"

Stretching the truth

Despite these suspicions, to our knowledge, no shadecloths have been tested for any change in UVR protection level when being stretched.

Currently, the UVR protection provided by shadecloth is covered by Australian Standard AS4174 and can be measured by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA), Australian Wool Testing Authority (AWTA) and the University of NSW. The AWTA and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), meanwhile, tests shade fabrics for tear and tensile strengths.

"ARPANSA carries out shadecloth testing in accordance with Australian Standards for synthetic shadecloth. The standard specifies that 'care should be taken not to distort cloth structure during the preparation of the test specimens'. There is no standard test method to test the change in UVR transmitted for material under stretched conditions," says Dr Peter Gies, senior research scientist of the Ultraviolet Radiation Section at ARPANSA.

The School of Optometry and Vision Science at the University of NSW has performed tests on shadecloth to the Australian Standard. Professor Stephen Dain, director of its Optics and Radiometry Laboratory, says that how much a shadecloth stretches will vary with installation, which is a problem for devising a test method that includes a stretched state.

"How much shadecloths stretch depends on how and where they are supported in the installation. So a shadecloth manufacturer should not be governed by what is out of their control," says Dain. "Generally, knitted shadecloths do stretch and would transmit more UVR than unstretched. Woven shadecloths do not stretch much at all, so the transmission changes are very small.

"An interesting project might be to take down shadecloth that has been in use for some time and test it in the used state, in which stretching would be the major change. We would need to quantify the tension applied and the duration of use to draw meaningful results," he says.>

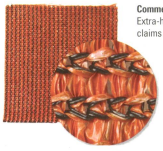
BEFORE YOU BUY SHADECLOTH

- **Choose the fabric wisely** Dark, closely woven and heavy fabric blocks or absorbs more UV radiation than lighter fabrics. Different fabrics have different abilities to block or absorb UV radiation. As a general guide, shadecloth should provides at least 94% UVR protection or greater.
- **Consider a shade audit** Conduct a shade audit of the site where shade is required. You don't have to be professionally qualified, and Cancer Council Australia's publications can be used as a guide (go to www.cancercouncil.com.au). A shade audit includes assessing the current shade of a site as well the types, times and months of use. A shade audit will help to plan a shade design that meets the needs of the site and its intended use.
- **Select your installer carefully** Check the credentials of the shade provider and the quality of the shadecloth. Does the company include a structural engineer's report for the site and structure? What warranty applies? Do they provide ongoing services such as safety checks, maintenance and cleaning? What are the specifications of the cloth used? Has it been independently tested to confirm the UV radiation protection level? What is the durability of the cloth?
- **Do you need approval?** Confirm with your local council whether you need a permit to put up the shadecloth.

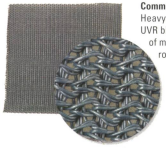
Source: Cancer Council NSW

Generally, knitted shadecloths stretch and transmit more UVR than unstretched.

Domestic and commercial knitted shadecloth fabrics

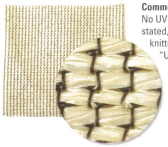


Commercial
Extra-heavy duty and claims 95% UVR block.



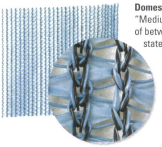
Commercial
Heavy duty with 90% UVR block, made of monofilament, round yarns.

Domestic
Extra-heavy and claims between 84-90% UVR block.



Commercial
No UVR block figures stated, but is closely knitted and claims "UV Extrablock".

Commercial
Lightweight and claims 98% UVR block.



Domestic
"Medium" UVR block of between 64%-70% stated on rolls.

Classification of sun-protective levels of shadecloth

The Australian Standard for sun-protective clothing includes a classification system similar to that used for sunscreen. Depending on how much UVR is blocked out, the cloth may be described as offering "Good protection", "Very good protection", or "Excellent protection".

The Cancer Council NSW believes there is a need for a similar system for the UVR protection of shadecloth. According to a spokesperson, "an Australian Standard for shadecloth similar to the classification for sun-protective clothing will improve consumers' ability to identify products with a low or high UVR protection level."

A Standards Australia spokesperson explained that shadecloth differs from sun protective clothing in that factors such as the design and size of the shade structure, distance from the subjects, the level of reflected and diffused radiation, as well as the physical location of a person within the shade structure, can affect the level of protection provided. This is why the sun-protective levels of shadecloth, or a classification as such, are not included in the Australian Standard for shadecloth.

"UVR classification is not included in the standard for synthetic shadecloth because it is difficult to determine an accurate measure of protection for items which are not in close proximity to the skin and the committee did not want to provide a false sense of security. While the committee considered it, it was decided providing such information would give a false level of protection to users as there are many other factors to consider," says the Standards Australia spokesperson.

Standards Australia told CHOICE it has not received any proposals or requests to review the existing standard for shadecloth but welcomes anyone who wishes to do so (go to www.standards.org.au/).

Common sense

Australia has one of the highest skin cancer rates in the world. More than 380,000 Australians are treated for skin cancer each year – about 1000 people each day. Half of all Australians are diagnosed with skin cancer at some stage in their life. Skin cancer accounts for 80% of all newly diagnosed cancers each year. More than 9500 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed in Australia every year, with about 1600 people dying annually from skin cancer.

Cancer Council Australia's Slip! Slop! Slap! Seek! Slide! campaign, beseeching us to protect ourselves with clothing, sunscreen, hat, shade and sunglasses, is a catch-all for the layers of protection your skin needs against harmful UV rays.

"Shade is an essential part of the sun protection combination," says the council's spokesperson. "The provision of strategically placed shade can be highly effective in reducing UV radiation exposure, as well as making the environment more comfortable. Shade alone can reduce UV radiation exposure by 75%."

For pointers about buying shade sails or having shadecloth installed by a professional, see Before You Buy Shadecloth, page 17, for advice from the Cancer Council NSW.

Says Christopher Nolan: "As far as selection of the cloth is concerned, a rule of thumb is that the heavier the cloth, the greater the UV protection. In my view, one should not get too hung up about the UVR block, because there is always going to be significant reflected radiation, which logically requires other forms of protection such as clothing and sunscreen. Black and dark green are better colours for UV absorption, but really should not dictate choice."

As well, given that the performance of a shadecloth depends on the way it is designed and installed, it is important to find a skilled and experienced designer and installer. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIET

The risk to childcare centres

Lack of knowledge and expertise in the industry, resulting in shade devices that fail to provide adequate protection, has significant implications for childcare centres, which are legally obliged to have adequate shade as part of their licence conditions.

Under the Children's Services Regulations 2004 (NSW), outdoor play space "must be adequately shaded" in accordance with guidelines published by Cancer Council NSW's *Shade for Child Care Services*, including, among other things, that shadecloths should have minimum 94% ultraviolet radiation block.

However, CHOICE discovered that childcare centres are left to their own devices when it comes to ensuring adequate sun protection and compliance to regulation.

When Juliet Ranieri (above), director of KU Wahroonga Preschool, was looking to replace the mouldy and saggy shadecloth in the school, she called five shade installers. Quote-and-leave attitudes and product-pushing characterised her experience among the four firms she didn't choose.

Only one firm took Ranieri through the kind of materials it would use, the UVR block of the material, how it planned to design the shade and how that would suit what she wanted: a simple green shadecloth with the right UVR block that was big enough to cover the children's playground.

"One installer tried to convince me I needed multicoloured shadecloths, while another told me they could put the new shade sail over the old poles, which I was told later caused the sag in the old shade sail," says Ranieri. "Another took out two business cards; he was both a shade installer and an electrician."

In the end, she chose the installer who offered the most detailed explanation of what the school's $24,000 was being spent on and who was backed up with credentials from past jobs. Not only did she make the reference checks, she drove around to look at the work the installer had done before. She has never had a professional shade audit done but studied the Cancer Council NSW's guidelines and SunSmart recommendations closely.

A shade audit is not a pre-condition for a childcare service to be certified SunSmart but Ranieri conducted her own shade assessment before she had the shadecloth put up. CHOICE set up and attended a preliminary shade audit for the KU Wahroonga Preschool with architect and shade auditor John Greenwood (below). The preschool scored 9.5 out of a possible 10 for having the right shade materials and shade projected in the right areas.

"Juliet understood the shade needs of her site. She knew what material the shadecloth was made of and what protection it offered. This is rare as many people we have done shade audits for do not know where shade is really needed or what UV protection is required. Her efforts in getting the right installer have been a big factor in achieving a successful shade outcome," says Greenwood.

When he conducted audits of seven childcare centres between January 2007 and November 2008, Greenwood found none complied fully with regulations, despite two being SunSmart certified.

CHOICE asked the Department of Community Services (DoCS) and the Cancer Council Australia for solutions they may have considered in ensuring what "adequate shade" is in practice, but no one seems to take responsibility for solving the problem.

A Cancer Council Australia spokesperson says: "Regulation is the responsibility of state governments, each of which has its own recommendations or guidelines for sun protection, shade in outdoor spaces and duty of care." She added that the Cancer Council is a non-government organisation, not an enforcement agency, and cannot regulate for shade in early childhood services.

A DoCS spokesperson told CHOICE: "DoCS supports moves to improve the quality of equipment used in children's services. However, the installation of equipment in children's services, whether it be shadecloths, playground equipment, or kitchen facilities, is managed by the individual children's service. DoCS does not have a mandate to regulate the shadecloth industry." However, the licence conditions that adequate shade must be provided as part of a childcare services facilities and equipment requirement falls within DoCS' jurisdiction.

Childcare centres must be proactive about ensuring adequate sun protection for outdoor play areas.

CHOICE verdict

CHOICE would like to see state governments better monitor childcare centres' compliance with the Cancer Council guidelines. Shade audits and installation of any shadecloth, as required by those guidelines, should be enforced as a condition of licensing for childcare centres.

Cashback capers

Getting a partial refund for big ticket items may sound great, but not everyone is smiling.

nutshell

- Retailers and manufacturers love cashback schemes as they increase their sales and profits.
- Cashback can work for consumers too, provided you're prepared to jump through hoops, follow strict rules and wait.

Some shoppers experience delays and costs, forget to redeem their vouchers or simply have perfectly valid claims denied.

Wander through any major store, and "cashback" will be one of the most prominent marketing tactics you'll see. At face value, a cashback scheme may simply require you to return a voucher to the manufacturer to get $100 off the tag price of that plasma TV or computer you've always wanted. And after all, who isn't attracted to the idea of getting something for nothing?

CHOICE has dug deeper, however, and found there's more to cashback promotions than meets the eye. Numerous consumer complaints indicate inordinate waiting times, tricky terms and conditions, and valid claims being denied despite consumers producing the documentary evidence proving everything was submitted on time.

Retail and manufacturing marketing executives are certainly onto a winner with cashback schemes, but consumers don't always benefit. By arming yourself with the knowledge to make cashback work for you, you may avoid some of the problems our readers have experienced.

How cashback works

The idea is quite simple: a retailer might advertise a computer for $1000, but as an incentive for you to buy it, the manufacturer provides a $100 cashback voucher. In theory, then, the computer is really costing you $900.

However, to get the $100 back, you need to register your claim by returning the completed voucher with additional details to prove where and when you bought the computer. It's important to read and follow the manufacturer's terms and conditions; there will be a deadline for receipt of the claim information and you may need to include the barcode printed on the cardboard box in which your computer came. You'll then need to wait to receive the money, which may be sent as a cheque or paid directly into your bank account.

In many cases, this process works fine. But there are plenty of complaints from consumers to suggest numerous exceptions to the rule have occurred.

Potential traps in the scheme

The cashback system is premised on the fact that many people – although only the manufacturer knows *how* many (see Did You Know?, opposite) – will never make a successful claim, commonly for reasons such as:

- consumers forget to return the claim form and other proof of purchase
- the consumer loses the necessary documentation
- the claim is deemed invalid, because it's late or incomplete
- consumers spend so much time and effort chasing the claim they eventually give up
- a perfectly valid claim is rejected by the manufacturer
- consumers are stung by unfair terms and conditions of the cashback schemes.

CASHBACK: YOUR FEEDBACK

We asked members for their experiences with cashback schemes.

- "Sony had a $100 cashback offer on an LCD TV. The process was fairly simple and the money arrived in a reasonable amount of time."
  – **Peter**
- "When I read the fine print in the terms and conditions it actually said the amount can be changed at the discretion of the company!"
  – **Janette**
- "I recently bought a printer and when registering it online I read the terms and conditions which stated that several retailers (such as Big W and DSE) were not included. I will be taking the printer back as the cashback was a big influence on which brand I bought."
  – **Peter**

These are just some of the potential traps. Redemptions can take months to process and involve unnecessary and frustrating delays. There's also the possibility the computer or TV was overpriced in the first place, and even taking the cashback into account you may still have got a better deal elsewhere. The model may also be older or inferior, and about to be replaced by a better one.

Cashback Australia

In 2007 Cashback Australia Ltd, a company that ran promotions in shops promising cashback refunds of "up to 100%" of the purchase price of items, went into liquidation. It had already been banned from trading in South Australia as "it wasn't in the best interests of South Australian consumers", according to the state's Office of Consumer and Business Affairs. The company was also the subject of warnings by fair trading authorities in NSW, Queensland and WA, all of which were concerned about the viability of the scheme and rules of redemption.

CHOICE members with valid Cashback Australia Ltd vouchers were paid as little as 10% or 20% of the purchase price, despite complying with the relevant terms and conditions. The trap was hidden in the words "up to 100%". Like all cashback schemes, the system relied on "slippage" – the ratio of people who don't make a claim. When many people claimed, the payout rate per customer was reduced. Among Cashback Australia Ltd's strict, and at times bizarre, conditions were:

- customers had to wait up to 51 months before claiming
- a claim form sent in early (before the "redemption period") would invalidate the claim
- consumers' claims could be invalidated if Cashback Australia "believed they were reminded to make their claim by the media or any organisation or service," according to the NSW Office of Fair Trading.

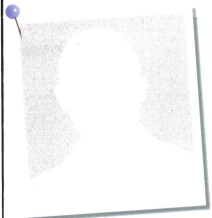
Complaints about cashback offers received by the NSW Office of Fair Trading increased by a whopping 1600% between 2005 and 2008. Four years ago there were 27 complaints; in 2008 there were 458. This spike was largely due to Cashback Australia Ltd. >

Cashback schemes are premised on the fact that many buyers will never make a successful claim for their cash refund.

Did you know ?

"Commercial in-confidence" Manufacturers don't like to talk about how many cashback claims are successful and how many are declined. While they claim this information is commercial in confidence, publicity about low redemption rates wouldn't exactly be good for their public image. International studies have suggested the percentage of successful claims can range from 1% up to 80%. A Sony Canada executive was quoted as saying average industry redemption rates are 10% and can be as low as 1%, but Sony Australia says its rate is 70%. *Marketing Communications: Theory and Applications*, a university textbook by John R. Rossiter and Steven Bellman, suggests a redemption rate of 50%, indicating that half of customers who buy a product with a cashback promotion do not redeem the offer.

71% of the 108 respondents to a recent online poll said a cashback promotion had influenced their decision to buy an item. Visit www.choice.com.au/cashback for your say.



Acer or joker?

When John purchased an Acer notebook for $740 in March 2008, a $150 cashback voucher was offered by the retailer (a Good Guys store in NSW) to sweeten the deal. But despite complying with Acer's terms and conditions, which included the promise that claims would be processed after 12 weeks, John was still waiting for his money when he spoke to us in December. After we contacted Acer on John's behalf, the company paid him. But this response didn't seem to be forthcoming until CHOICE got involved.

John's complaint about Acer isn't unique or confined to NSW. Lyn and Des (page 22), readers from WA, told us how Acer knocked back their claim by saying it hadn't received their documents, even though Australia Post confirmed the documents had been sent to Acer on time. And in Victoria, Consumer Affairs (CAV) singled out Acer's cashback offers for harsh criticism in its last annual report. In the 2007-2008 financial year, CAV received more than 50 complaints about Acer products and warranty servicing, the highest number of complaints about an individual computer retailer or manufacturer.

"Complaints included the rejection of cashback and promotional bonus claims on the slightest pretext, including stating the company had not received documentation, despite consumers having proof they sent it in on time," according to CAV's annual report. Other complaints about Acer included "poor customer service, including long delays in getting through to customer service, messages not being returned, alleged rudeness of Acer staff and inconsistent advice as to the reason for delays."

CAV advises consumers to take particular care when buying Acer products to ensure you understand the fine print with advertised bonus offers and warranties.

"Documents not received"

In early October 2008, Lyn and Des purchased an Acer laptop from Officeworks in Western Australia. The deal included a $99 cashback offer from Acer.

"The conditions stated that claims must be lodged within 14 days of purchase, with the appropriate documents," says Lyn. "We complied with these terms and returned the documents on 10 October by registered post. But after waiting the required six-week period, I checked the status of our claim on Acer's website. It stated that the claim had been declined, because 'documents were not received by the due date of 20 October'."

PHOTO COURTESY OF LYN.

Lyn contacted Australia Post, which confirmed the letter was delivered on 13 October, seven days after the laptop had been purchased and well within the 14 days stipulated by Acer. (It's not the first time Acer has claimed that it didn't receive documents despite consumers having proof – see Acer or Joker?, page 21 for more).

Lyn and Des emailed Acer in late November and received an automatic email saying a response would be sent within two days. This never happened. Next, Lyn phoned Acer, but after being put on hold for a long period, she gave up. When she called back a little later the office had closed.

"Had we not registered the letter we would have had no proof that it was delivered within the 14 days. We feel we were getting the run-around."

We provided details of this complaint to Acer, with Lyn's reference number, requesting an explanation for the long delays, poor customer service and failure to honour the cashback commitment. We didn't receive a response by our deadline, but within a few weeks, Acer sent a cheque to Lyn and Des. "We feel had we not contacted CHOICE we would still be waiting for our cashback," says Lyn.

BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS

Ever wondered why we make financial decisions that may not be in our best, "rational" interests – like choosing a cashback "prize" we may never receive instead of a simple price discount? Or deciding where to buy groceries based on four cents discount per litre petrol vouchers, even though that supermarket's starting prices might be higher than others? Go to www.choice.com.au/cashback for more about "behavioural economics" and psychological tricks influencing our shopping and personal finance decisions.

CHOICE verdict

Cashback schemes should not have onerous terms and conditions designed to catch consumers out. And CHOICE would like to see retailers stop using cashback promotions for lower value retail items – for example $10 cashback on an item that costs $90. We – and consumers – would rather see a straight price discount on small items, otherwise consumers are just spending time and money (postage expenses) on small claims, which is inefficient for everyone.

Seven ways to make cashback work for you

1 Don't be manipulated Cashback isn't really a gift or prize, but rather a marketing tool used to increase the sales and profits of manufacturers and retailers. They know many people won't make a valid claim and employ tricky terms and conditions that catch people out.

2 Check the product and price are right first This includes shopping around and comparing prices in other shops, rather than being dazzled by the cashback deal. Retailers may print the after-cashback price in larger print than the regular price, but it's a discount many people will never receive.

3 There may be costs and inconveniences associated with making a claim These include postage, photocopying and internet use. And if something goes wrong, you'll have to spend time on the phone and/or email chasing up your claim.

4 Arm yourself with knowledge Read the terms and conditions very carefully and make sure you comply, otherwise your claim could be denied.

5 Keep records, including proof of purchase and other information that the terms and conditions stipulate, such as the barcode on the computer's box. Handwritten receipts and photocopies of barcodes may not be accepted. Be sure to use neat handwriting on the claim form; according to one promotion we saw, "incomplete, indecipherable or illegible claims will be deemed invalid."

6 Proof of postage Use registered post so you can prove you returned the information on time. It could be a couple of extra dollars well spent.

7 Complaints If you don't receive the money, first contact the manufacturer and if your complaint isn't dealt with satisfactorily, ask for it to be escalated. If that doesn't work, you can also raise the issue with the retailer who sold you the product and cashback deal. A recent statement by New Zealand's Commerce Commissioner indicates that retailers are also responsible and cannot distance themselves from the offer when redemption problems occur, and the same is most likely true in Australia. Next, lodge a complaint with your state or territory's fair trading department.

CHOICE ONLINE

Visit our blog at www.choice.com.au/cashback to tell us your experiences about cashback.

Generic savings

Generic drugs have the same active ingredients as the branded versions and allow you to make substantial savings.

nutshell

- You can save real money without compromising on quality by buying generic versions of your prescription medicine.
- Not all branded drugs have a generic equivalent, but it's worth asking if a cheaper alternative is available.

Buying the generic version of your prescription medicine can save you up to $11 each time you visit the chemist – and it doesn't require you to compromise on quality.

A generic drug is a copy of a brand-name drug. It has exactly the same active ingredients and clinical effects and is manufactured to the same standard as its branded equivalent, so for most people it's safe to substitute a brand-name medication with a generic version. However, while generic drugs contain the same active ingredients, other inactive ingredients such as colouring or flavouring may differ, which means they may look slightly different to the branded version.

Do all drugs have a generic alternative?

Unfortunately, not all branded drugs have a generic equivalent. That's because newly developed medicines are protected by a patent, typically for 20 years. This means the original brand manufacturer has the sole right to sell the drug during that time, which allows it to recoup money invested in research and development, marketing, promotion and brand creation.

When patents come close to expiry, however, other manufacturers can then apply to the Therapeutic Goods Administration for the right to sell competing generic drugs. These medications must meet the same quality and safety standards as their brand-name equivalents before they reach pharmacists' shelves.

How you can start saving

When your doctor prescribes you a medicine, ask whether there is a less expensive brand that might be suitable for your condition. You can request your pharmacist substitute a cheaper brand if possible (unless the doctor has marked the prescription "no substitution").

You can also find out if a generic alternative is available from the Department of Health and Ageing's *Schedule of Pharmaceutical Benefits*. The schedule is available online at www.pbs.gov.au/html/consumer/home.

For more information on generic drugs, visit the National Prescribing Service at www.nps.org.au/consumers/campaigns/generic_medicines, or contact the Medicines Line on 1300 888 763. ■

10 POPULAR DRUGS COMPARED

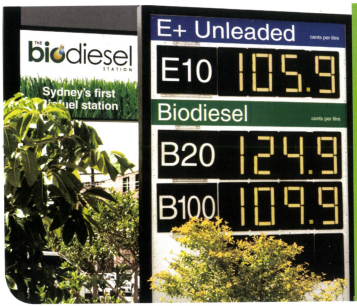
Brand (A)	Generic alternative	What you can save (B)
Betaloc tab 50mg	Chemmart Metoprolol, Genrx Meotoprolol, Metohexal, Metolol, Metrol 50, Minax 50, Terry White Chemists Metoprolol	$2.54
Cipramil tab 20mg (base)	Celapram, Celica, Chemmart Citalopram, Ciazil, Citalobell, Citalopram 20, Citalopram Winthrop, Genrx Citalopram, Talam, Talohexal, Terry White Chemists Citalopram	$3.49
Diabex tab 1g	Diaformin 1000, Formet 1000, Glucohexal	$1.41
Microgynon 30ED 21 tab 150ug/30ug & 7 inert tablets	Levlen Ed, Monofeme 28	$11.45
Panadeine Forte 30mg-500mg 60 tab	Codalgin Forte, Codapane Forte, Comfarol Forte, Dolaporte, Prodeine Forte	$4.29
Pravachol tab 40mg	Chemmart Pravastatin,Cholstat 40, Genrx Pravastatin, Lipostat 40, Liprachol, Pravastatin 40, Pravastatin-DP, Pravastatin Winthrop, Terry White Chemists Pravastatin, Vastorán	$3.07
Prozac cap 20mg (base)	Auscap, Chemmart Fluoxetine, Fluohexal, Fluoxebell, Fluoxetine 20, Fluoxetine – DP, Genrx Fluoxetine, Lovan, Terry White Chemists Fluoxetine, Zactin	$4.13
Tramal cap 50mg	Chemmart Tramadol, Genrx Tramadol, Terry White Chemists Tramadol, Tramedo, Zýdol	$2.42
Zantac 150mg (base)	Ausran, Chemmart Ranitidine, Genrx Ranitidine, Rani 2, Ranihexal , Ranoxyl, Terry White Chemists Ranitidine, Ulcaid	$1.71
Zyloprim tab 300mg	Allohexal, Allosig, Chemmart Allopurinol, Genrx Allopurinol, Progout 300, Terry White Chemists Allopurinol	$1.80

TABLE NOTES

(A) These are commonly prescribed drugs based on the Schedule of Pharmaceutical Benefits for the year to June 2007. (B) The price differences can vary depending on the dosage and form of the medication; that is, tablets or capsules.

CHOICE ONLINE

To see the full article on generic medicines, including a Q&A and the savings you can make on 100 popular prescription drugs, visit: www.choice.com.au/genericdrugs



'Eco-driving' saves you money

Despite a recent drop in fuel prices, reducing your dependency on petrol will ultimately benefit both your wallet and the environment. CHOICE outlines some changes you can start making now.

nutshell

- Petrol prices will continue to hurt the hip pocket and it will be a long wait for public transport and town planning options that alleviate our dependence on private transport.
- We compare the alternative fuels on offer, what you can save by fuel switching, downsizing and driving less.

It's been referred to as a double crisis; oil supplies that won't last forever, especially if demand continues to increase, and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to limit the impacts of global warming. And while the price of petrol fluctuates in the short term, it's likely to increase considerably in the long term, because of the scarcity of oil and greater pollution controls.

Experts say we need major investment in better town planning to reduce the need for long trips, infrastructure for public transport, better freight systems and improved motor vehicle technologies that include the use of renewable energy. Holden recently announced its first 85% ethanol-fuelled car will be produced from its Adelaide plant in 2010. However, you could be forgiven for yawning while you wait for all that to happen.

Even though the federal government's proposed FuelWatch scheme was voted down in the Senate last November, you can still keep track of price information in most major cities through the motormouth.com.au website, or at fuelwatch.wa.gov.au if you live in WA.

Your choice of car, its fuel and your driving behaviour affect the environment and your wallet. Fortunately, you can make decent changes with what's already available.

Did you know ?

Palm oil and the environment Some critics attack biodiesel because it can be sourced from palm oil – increased production of which is causing deforestation in places such as Indonesia. But the independent sustainability analyst Worldwatch Institute says less than 1% of palm oil goes towards biodiesel and the real demand for palm oil arises from food, cosmetics and industrial uses.

Alternative fuel options for your car

Fuels made from plant and animal matter – biofuels – can reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions by vehicles because burning them releases only the carbon that was absorbed when growing. Biofuels aren't new; Henry Ford's first car ran on alcohol and Rudolf Diesel's engine first fired with peanut oil. Two biofuels, ethanol and biodiesel, can be used in most existing motor vehicles and are relatively easy to handle and use.

Don't let the concern that switching fuels might invalidate your warranty put you off. Warranties cover workmanship rather than damage caused by fuel – that's the responsibility of the fuel supplier, and fuels have to meet Australian standards to be sold at a service station. Ensure that the fuel type will suit your vehicle – visit www.fcai.com.au to check, or ask your manufacturer directly.

Each of the alternative liquid fuels most commonly available in Australia has good and bad points (see How Do the Alternatives Measure Up?, page 26). The broader environmental impacts of ethanol and biodiesel depend very much on how they're produced. Australia uses mostly residues from food, sugar and fibre crops to produce bioenergy, but there are some canola and cottonseed crops dedicated to biofuel. While Australia doesn't have independent certification of the environmental performance of the fuels, in New Zealand, the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority is developing a sustainability mark for biofuels so consumers can identify those that are produced sustainably.

Since no single type of biofuel can provide enough fuel to cover our current demand, we need a combination of solutions, including reducing our fuel dependence.

Soften the impact on your wallet and the environment

If living without a car is not an option, you don't have to buy a "green" car to make a significant difference to your bills and environmental impact. To see which combination of the alternatives suits you, see the table, Cars and Fuels Compared, below.

Downsize Choosing the right car for your needs and driving style has a big impact on your costs. If you only drive around town, you may not need a family car. Instead, the inexpensive two-seater Smart Fortwo runs on petrol and is comparable on fuel and emissions to the much more expensive Toyota Prius.

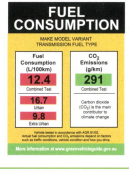
Small cars can cost about a third less to run than a 4WD, and cars such as the Hyundai Getz are cheap to buy so their whole-of-life costs are less than half those of a 4WD such as the Nissan Patrol. Consider renting a 4WD for the times you need off-road or towing capacity.

As well as car size, include fuel efficiency as a purchasing criteria. All new vehicles now have to carry a fuel consumption label (see Did You Know?, above.right). If carrying seven people is what you need, buying a Kia Carnival instead of a NissaPatrol can save you almost $7 every 100km on top of the $20,000+ you save at purchase.

Did you know?

Transparent fuel consumption

A new fuel consumption label was released on 1 October 2008 and shows urban and extra-urban (highway) driving figures in L/100km and a combined figure for greenhouse gas emissions in grams of CO_2 per kilometre. You can also compare figures for different cars at www.greenvehicleguide.gov.au.



The Toyota Corolla is a surprise pick in the Green Vehicle Guide (www.greenvehicleguide.gov.au). It runs on regular unleaded fuel, has respectable fuel use and emissions figures, is relatively inexpensive to buy and is popular enough that you may be able to find a recent secondhand model.

Hybrid vehicles allow the use of two fuel sources. A car that can switch between LPG in one tank to petrol from another could be considered a hybrid. The well-known Toyota Prius hybrid combines a conventional petrol engine with a rechargeable electric motor to achieve better fuel economy. The batteries recharge during normal driving when deceleration occurs. The Prius achieves tiny fuel consumption figures of 4.4L/100km. The catch is the purchase price of $37,400, which puts the relatively small Prius on par with many medium-sized passenger vehicles when it comes to whole-of-life costs. >

Since no single type of biofuel can provide enough fuel to cover current demand, we need to rely on a combination of solutions.

CARS AND FUELS COMPARED

Make (in order of fuel cost)	Fuel type	Fuel use L / 100km	CO_2kg / 100km	Car price	Fuel cost / 100 km	Fuel cost / week*
Toyota Prius	Electric/petrol	4.4	10.6	$37,400	$4.93	$14.23
Smart Fortwo	Petrol	4.7	11.2	$19,990	$5.27	$15.20
Hyundai Getz	Petrol	6.1	14.5	$13,990	$6.84	$19.73
Volkswagen Golf Trendline	Biodiesel20	5.6	12.8	$30,290	$7.44	$21.46
Volkswagen Golf Trendline	Diesel	5.5	14.9	$30,290	$7.87	$22.69
Toyota Corolla	Petrol	7.3	17.2	$20,990	$8.18	$23.61
Toyota Corolla	E10	7.5	16.8	$20,990	$8.24	$23.77
Ford FG Falcon G6	LPG (dedicated E-Gas)	14.9	24.0	$41,390	$9.40	$27.13
Ford FG Falcon G6	Petrol	10.5	25.1	$39,990	$11.77	$33.95
Kia Carnival	Petrol	11.0	26.2	$35,490	$12.33	$35.57
Nissan Patrol	Biodiesel20	10.9	24.6	$58,990	$14.61	$42.13
Nissan Patrol	Diesel	10.8	28.6	$58,990	$15.44	$44.55
Nissan Patrol	Petrol	17.2	40.8	$61,990	$19.28	$55.62

USING THE TABLE

Vehicles are best performers for fuel economy within each vehicle range, listed as current models in the Green Vehicle Guide as at June 2008, except the Ford Falcon, where the closest model to the dedicated E-gas option was chosen.

Price

Car Retail price, as at 28 August 2008 listed on manufacturers' websites.

Petrol and diesel Calculated with the national average fuel price for the week ending 30 November 2008, from the Australian Institute of Petroleum.

B20 Average price on 5 December 2008, from WA Fuelwatch.

LPG Major city average on 5 December 2008. (Source: Motormouth.)

E10 Priced at 2.5c less than petrol – the average difference across major cities. (Source: Motormouth.)

* Based on driving 15,000km per year.

Switch fuels In 2007 only 2.5% of vehicles registered in Australia used alternative fuel systems. There can be significant barriers to switching, such as converting your car or buying a new one, and some alternative fuels may save money in the short term but be expensive for you and/or the environment in the longer term, so choose wisely.

The main benefits of ethanol (E10) are environmental. Using E10 makes your vehicle 3% less efficient and as the fuel isn't 3% cheaper, you end up paying slightly more – about six cents for every 100km in a Toyota Corolla – for a saving of 0.4kg of CO_2 per100km.

To switch to biodiesel you need a diesel car. The most commonly available blend, B20, is slightly cheaper per litre and emits fewer greenhouse gases than regular diesel (see the table, Cars and Fuels Compared, page 25). Even regular diesel, however, can be considerably cheaper to run than an equivalent petrol model: a diesel Nissan Patrol costs about $4 less than a petrol version for every 100km and cuts greenhouse gas emissions by 30%. New diesel vehicles are generally much cleaner than in the past, because they are fitted with better soot filters. And the standard for regular diesel's sulphur concentration (which affects local air pollution) improved from January 2009.

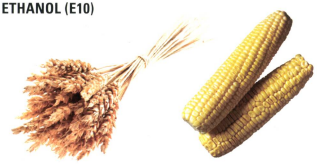
Liquefied petroeum gas (LPG) currently costs almost half as much as petrol. In a Ford Falcon, despite fuel economy decreasing, this means a saving of more than $2 every 100km.

Drive smarter and less Since 2003 we've seen a 10% increase in the number of passenger vehicles on Australian roads, and each car travels an average of 15,000km a year. Given that about half the car trips in Australian cities are less than five kilometres, we could all look at driving less often. Converting even a few of these trips to walking, cycling or public transport makes an impact.

If you need a car only occasionally, a car-sharing scheme such as GoGet or Smartdrivers, which have hourly rates, might suit. Members can book a vehicle online or over the phone, for as long as they need it. Such schemes currently operate in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and the Gold Coast, and include things such as dedicated car parking spaces, fuel, insurance and maintenance. ■

How do the fuel alternatives measure up?

ETHANOL (E10)



An alcohol usually produced by fermenting sugars from plants such as sugar cane, wheat and corn.

GOOD POINTS

- Made from many sources of renewable materials, including waste products such as sorghum stems, spent grain or sugar cane.
- Reduces reliance on non-renewable oil.
- Lower CO_2 emissions than petrol, when production and use are considered.
- Generally produces less local air pollution than petrol.
- Safe to use in most new cars at concentrations in petrol of up to 10%. Many new cars have an "E10 suitable" sticker near the fuel filler.
- Fuel excise on the ethanol component of the product negated by a government subsidy until 2011.

BAD POINTS

- Pure ethanol has lower energy content than petrol (67%), which means you travel a shorter distance on the same size tank of fuel.
- The crop required to produce the fuel can damage the quality and biodiversity of the local environment through clearing native vegetation, monoculture production and introducing invasive species.
- Can compete with other crops for land use and therefore raise food prices, which harms poorer consumers in developing countries for whom food is a higher proportion of their expenditure.
- Shouldn't be used on some older vehicles; check the list of suitable cars at www.fcai.com.au.
- If produced with artificial fertilisers and/or transported a long way, energy return and greenhouse benefits can be low or negative.
- Minor modifications are required to run a vehicle on pure ethanol – only E10 is sold in Australia.
- Limited availability: only a few hundred outlets across Australia.

BIODIESEL (B20)

Produced from vegetable and/or animal oil. B20 is more commonly sold than pure biodiesel – it's a blend of 20% biodiesel and 80% mineral diesel.

GOOD POINTS

- Made from many sources of renewable materials, including used cooking oil.
- Reduces reliance on non-renewable oil.
- Significantly lower CO_2 emissions than diesel, when production and use are considered.
- Biodegradable and non-toxic.
- Generally produces much less local air pollution than diesel.
- Pure biodiesel can be used in unmodified diesel engines or mixed with regular diesel.
- If made from agricultural or cooking residues it's cheaper than if made from specially grown sources, uses less land and water and has better CO_2 performance.
- Fuel excise on the biodiesel component of the product will be fully negated by a government grant until 2011.

BAD POINTS

- Pure biodiesel has lower energy content than diesel (86%), which means you travel a shorter distance on the same size fuel tank.
- The crop grown for the fuel can damage the biodiversity and quality the local environment through clearing native vegetation, monoculture production and introducing invasive species.
- Can compete with other crops for land use and raise food prices, which harms poorer consumers in developing countries for whom food is a higher proportion of their expenditure.
- If produced with artificial fertilisers and/or transported a long way, energy return and greenhouse benefits can be low or negative.
- Emits higher quantities of nitrogen oxides than diesel.
- Becomes less fluid in cold climates, so vehicle modification is required if using pure or high-proportion biodiesel blends.
- Very limited consumer availability – only a few dozen outlets, mostly in SA, WA and some in NSW.

LIQUEFIED PETROLEUM GAS (LPG)

Extracted from natural gas or derived as a by-product of the petroleum industry. Car LPG is a blend of mainly propane and butane, and is not interchangeable with LPG for barbecues.

GOOD POINTS

- Less local air pollution than petrol.
- Some reduction in CO_2 emissions compared with petrol for a given trip.
- Petrol and diesel vehicles can be converted for LPG use. A government grant of $2000 is available for conversion of an existing private vehicle, or $1000 for the purchase of a vehicle manufactured with an LPG unit (see www.ausindustry.gov.au or phone 13 28 46 for more information).
- Most conversions enable dual-fuel use; for example, petrol and LPG.
- Over 3200 outlets – more than for other alternative fuels.
- Substantially cheaper per litre than regular petrol, because it requires minimal processing and is not subject to excise until 2011.

BAD POINTS

- Made from non-renewable resources.
- Still emits considerable CO_2.
- Lower energy content than petrol, which means you travel a shorter distance on the same size tank of fuel. You need about 30% more LPG to go the same distance as petrol.
- Requires expensive car conversion with an initial outlay of $2000-$4000, so it's more attractive for higher-mileage vehicles. (See www.ausindustry.gov.au for accredited installers.)
- Some new cars are built to use LPG only.
- Some vehicles cannot be converted due to space limitations.
- Need to consider not only the current price of LPG, but what it might cost in future.

GREEN

HOW TO BE A GOOD ECO-DRIVER

A car's reported fuel consumption, in litres per 100km, is based on driving under standardised test conditions. But your driving style can increase that figure dramatically, and for every extra litre of petrol you use per 100km, it now costs $168 per year (based on a petrol price of $1.12 per litre and 15,000km per year). So if you can reduce consumption it is going to be good for your wallet.

"Eco-driving", as it's been termed, not only benefits the environment but saves you money and stress as well. To be an eco-driver you should:

- **Plan your trip well** Try to achieve several tasks with the one trip.
- **Take your time** You use less fuel if you drive a bit slower.
- **Shed the load** Take unnecessary items out of the car and take off your roof rack when it's not in use.
- **Keep it smooth** Avoid hard braking and acceleration.
- **Switch off** Ease up on the air conditioning, and stop the car and walk in to the fast food restaurant rather than idle in a long queue.
- **Maintain it** Regularly check that the tyre pressure is right for your car and tyres, and have the car serviced.

WHICH AND US MARKET DIFFERENCES

Just desserts

Yoghurt doesn't have to be loaded with fat to taste deliciously creamy. CHOICE's team of tasters gives top marks to some low-fat brands.

nutshell

- Fourteen brands of premium yoghurt on test. We tell you which taste best.
- Two of the top-scoring brands are low in fat. Clever food technology is used to make them taste creamy.

Yoghurt is a convenient dessert with a healthy reputation. Made from milk, it has plenty of quality protein, calcium and B vitamins. But are those extra delicious premium brands just as healthy, or do they taste so good because they're loaded with fat and sugar?

To find out, CHOICE bought 14 brands of premium yoghurt widely available from the major supermarket chains. There's no clear definition of premium yoghurt so we looked for yoghurts described on the label as "premium", "gourmet", "European style" or "Greek style". Often they were also described as "rich", "thick" or "creamy". We compared their fat and sugar contents and asked some ordinary consumers to tell us which ones they thought tasted best.

The good news is that there are brands of premium yoghurt you can really enjoy without going on a guilt trip.

What to buy $

LOW FAT AND GREAT TASTE

Dairy Farmers Thick & Creamy Field Strawberries	$0.64 / 100g
Tamar Valley Premium Creamy Raspberry	$1.11 / 100g

GREAT TASTE, BUT NOT LOW FAT

Dairy Bliss Spring Delights Deli Yoghurt Strawberry	$0.96 / 100g
Gippsland Dairy Raspberry Twist	$1.21 / 100g
King Island Dairy Vanilla Bean Yoghurt	$1.24 / 100g

Likes and dislikes

CHOICE tested only flavoured yoghurts as most people find plain yoghurt straight from the tub unappealing. Since most brands have a wide range of flavours, where possible we chose strawberry as it is the most common. We asked some ordinary consumers, all CHOICE staff, to taste the yoghurts and rate them for creaminess and overall impression.

On average our tasters liked all the yoghurts, but there were some clear favourites (see What to Buy, below left). These were described as "thick and creamy" and "very fruity". By contrast, brands the tasters didn't like as much were typically described as "thin texture", "a bit watery" or "a touch bland". And often price is a fair guide – overall the tasters preferred the more expensive brands.

So creamy – but where's the cream?

On average, the tasters preferred the yoghurts that tasted creamiest. Fortunately, however, yoghurt doesn't have to be loaded with fat to taste creamy. While three of the top five brands contain plenty of fat and deliver about 8% of your daily energy needs in one hit, the other two, Dairy Farmers Thick & Creamy Field Strawberries and Tamar Valley Premium Creamy Raspberry, are actually low in fat. Their manufacturers have used intelligent food science to give the impression of a rich and creamy yoghurt (see Food Science at its Best, above right).

While all the tested yoghurts contain added sugar which boosts their kilojoules, even the most fattening come in well under the energy content of many other desserts. A piece of pavlova (75g), for example, would hit you with about 1140kJ, while a serving of chocolate mousse (85g) delivers 1260kJ. ■

FOOD SCIENCE AT ITS BEST

Most of us really enjoy creamy foods, so it's not surprising that food scientists have studied what creamy really means – and it turns out to be far from simple.

As consumers we experience creaminess as a range of sensations that give a full and sweet taste that's smooth and velvety. You'd reasonably expect the amount of fat in the food to be an important factor, and the science confirms this is indeed true. But fortunately for those of us watching our weight, the fat's not the whole story. It turns out that the thickness, or viscosity, of food is also an important factor in making it taste creamy. Some starches and food gums can have an even bigger impact on the creaminess of the taste than extra fat. And some flavours, such as vanilla, can also improve the sensation of creaminess.

Almost all the premium yoghurts in our test contain additives designed to make them taste creamier, as well as colours and flavours. The only one that doesn't, King Island Dairy Vanilla Bean Yoghurt, has the highest level of fat as well as creaminess-boosting vanilla flavour. The additive used by most brands is chemically modified tapioca starch – hydroxypropyl distarch phosphate (1442). Others you might see on labels are locust bean gum (410, extracted from seeds of the carob tree), guar gum (412, from the seed of the guar plant that grows in India and Pakistan) or xanthan gum (415, a sticky substance made by a species of bacteria).

You'll often also see gelatine listed among the ingredients; it's added to help prevent separation of watery liquid that can form an unattractive puddle on top of the yoghurt. (Vegetarians should check the labels as gelatine is an animal product.)

Low Fat Fruit Yogurt
Nutrition Information
Ingredients
Ingredients
Skim Milk, Concentrated Skim Milk, Sugar, Fruit (Strawberry) (8% Minimum), Cream, Thickener (1442 Derived from Corn, Tapioca), Halal Gelatine, Flavours, Lemon Juice Concentrate, Colours (120, 160b), Food Acids (296, 330, 331), Cultures (L.Acidophilus, Bifidobacterium, S.Thermophilus).

These additives are used in many processed foods, but are added only in very small amounts and there are no safety issues. Unfortunately, however, despite all the research, combining the additives in just the right amounts to get a really creamy texture is still more of an art than a science. We found some big differences in creaminess between yoghurts using the same additives – some manufacturers must have better research and development labs than others.

Yoghurt's creaminess is not determined solely by its fat content; other factors such as viscosity and even flavour can improve the creamy sensation.

PREMIUM YOGHURT

Brand (in rank order by taste)	Taste score (%)	Per 100g Energy (kJ)	Total fat (g)	Sugars (tsp)	Price ($)
Dairy Bliss Spring Delights Deli Yoghurt Strawberry (Aldi)	72	547	4.7	3.5	0.96
Gippsland Dairy Raspberry Twist	72	673	6.0	3.0	1.21
Dairy Farmers Thick & Creamy Field Strawberries	69	405	1.7	3.5	0.64
King Island Dairy Vanilla Bean Yoghurt	68	545	6.3	3.0	1.24
Tamar Valley Premium Creamy Raspberry	67	433	2.0	3.5	1.11
Margaret River Strawberry	61	468	3.1	3.5	0.80
Woolworths Select Low Fat Strawberry	61	398	1.0	3.0	0.63
You'll Love Coles Strawberry	61	470	3.8	3.5	0.60
Ski Divine Wild Strawberry	58	470	3.8	3.5	0.57
Vaalia Low Fat Strawberry	58	413	1.3	4.0	0.77
Bulla Greek Style Gourmet Blackberry and Blueberry	56	530	3.0	3.5	1.14
Gippsland Dairy Raspberry Organic Yoghurt	56	464	4.7	2.5	0.64
Brooklea Indulge Strawberry (Aldi)	53	496	3.8	4.0	0.44
Jalna Premium Creamy Strawberry	53	522	4.6	3.0	0.74

USING THE TABLE

Taste scores These are average scores from a group of 32 ordinary consumers (16 men and 16 women). They were asked to rate the yoghurts for creaminess and overall impression. Each taster rated four yoghurts and each yoghurt was tasted by nine or 10 people. The yoghurts were presented in plain containers identified only by letters and numbers so the tasters didn't know the brands or types of yoghurt they were eating.

Nutrients These are based on information on the label. The manufacturers' recommended serving sizes ranged from 100g to 200g, so for ease of comparison we give the amounts of energy, fat and sugar per 100g. (One teaspoon of sugar weighs 4g.)

Price Based on prices we paid in Sydney supermarkets in October 2008.

HRT: Revisiting the pros and cons

Negative publicity about hormone replacement therapy has prompted a flood of alternatives for treating menopausal symptoms. CHOICE reviews which works and which could be merely snake oil.

nutshell

- For women suffering moderate to severe symptoms of menopause, the benefits of HRT are likely to outweigh the risks.
- Of the alternatives to HRT, black cohosh appears to be the most effective option, and is also among the cheapest.

In 2002, a major American study involving hormone replacement therapy – the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) trial – was stopped early because researchers were concerned about the increased incidence of breast cancer, heart disease and blood clots among women taking the hormones. The ensuing media frenzy prompted many women to abandon the treatment, instead either putting up with the discomfort caused by menopause symptoms, or perhaps turning to alternatives.

Since the furore, sales of HRT alternatives have boomed, with surveys suggesting more than half of all menopausal women have taken some form of alternative therapy. But do alternatives, such as herbal medicines or the controversial bio-identical (or natural) hormones, actually work?

Now the dust has settled, CHOICE decided it was time to re-examine the WHI study and its implications in light of new analyses of the research (see HRT Revisited: The Real Pros and Cons, above right), and weigh up the various alternatives.

Jargonbuster @*!?

Isoflavones A class of organic compounds and biomolecules found in plants. They have antioxidant and oestrogenic properties.
Pharmacopoeia A book, published by a government authority or medical or pharmaceutical society, containing directions for the identification of samples and the preparation of compound medicines.
Rhizome A horizontal stem of a plant which is usually found underground.

Herbal menopause remedies

We found more than 20 herbal remedies on the market that claim to relieve the symptoms of menopause. Following are some of the main ingredients and their likely effectiveness.

Black cohosh This North American root and rhizome is the most well-researched herbal product on the market. However, the results of clinical trials are mixed, with some studies finding it's better than a placebo (a dummy pill) and others finding that while symptoms are indeed reduced, the effect is not much better than a placebo. Two studies testing a preparation of St John's wort combined with black cohosh found the treatment improved menopausal symptoms, with one study also reporting improvements in depression.

In Australia, the market-leading black cohosh product is Schaper & Brummer Remifemin. Flordis' Femular is another such product. Several products contain black cohosh mixed with other ingredients.

Soy isoflavone extracts Blackmores Phytolife and Herron Menopause Relief both contain soy isoflavones as their main active ingredient. In some products they're mixed with other ingredients.

Soy extracts came to prominence after it was observed that Asian women, who typically eat a lot of soy, don't experience the same discomfort from menopausal symptoms as Western women. While it's possible this has a cultural basis, or could have more to do with the relatively high vegetable/low meat intake of Asian women, soy's mild oestrogenic properties could be at least partly responsible.

THE WHI STUDY IN A NEW LIGHT

One of the main criticisms of the 2002 Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study is that the subject women ranged in age from 50-79, with an average age of 63, yet the average age at which women experience menopause is 51, so the majority had no symptoms and were taking HRT many years after menopause. With this in mind, the results have been reanalysed, taking the age of women into account. In particular, the reanalysis focused on women under 60 – those most likely to use HRT to reduce symptoms at or near the time of menopause.

Breast cancer That HRT increases the risk of breast cancer isn't denied. However, that increased risk is small in absolute terms. Analysis of the WHI study found that among women in their 50s who took HRT for the first time, there was no increase in the risk of getting breast cancer. After more than five years, the risk appears to increase, and is comparable with the increased risk of that for women who have had their first pregnancy after the age of 35, drink more than two alcoholic drinks a day, are overweight (have a body mass index of 25-30) or had a late menopause (after 55). Within five years of stopping HRT, the risk returns to normal levels. Some epidemiological studies have reported that rates of breast cancer have decreased among women over 50, coinciding with decreased use of HRT since the WHI uproar.

Blood clots There is concern about HRT and the increased risk of blood clots either in the lungs or presenting as deep vein thrombosis, especially among women who are obese or have other risk factors for clotting – something for which women should ideally be screened before commencing therapy.

Cardiovascular disease Among the younger group, it was concluded that HRT doesn't increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, and may in fact reduce it. However, there's evidence that if HRT is started when women are older and already have cardiovascular disease, it can increase the risk of cardiac events.

There are ways of reducing the risks of side-effects, including lowering HRT doses, using oestrogen-only therapy (only women who've undergone hysterectomy) and starting HRT near menopause. There's some evidence that using skin patches, rather than tablets, can reduce the risk of clots.

Apart from reducing the severity of symptoms associated with menopause, the benefits of HRT include a reduced rate of fractures related to osteoporosis, although the risk returns to normal after HRT is stopped, and reduced rates of colorectal cancer.

According to Professor Henry Burger AO, Director of the Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health in Melbourne, HRT given to women around the time of menopause is a safe and effective treatment of symptoms if given for up to five years. "However, there's no arbitrary time limit, so it's up to doctors to keep women informed about risks and benefits and make decisions about whether to continue on a case-by-case basis," says Professor Burger.

Essentially, it's up to individual women, in consultation with their doctor, to weigh up their personal risks versus the potential benefits of taking HRT, the most significant of which being a reduction (not necessarily elimination) of menopause symptoms.

A review of studies of soy extracts found that about half had evidence they helped, and half didn't. The differences in results could not be explained by the quality of studies, dosage or severity of symptoms. The contradictory evidence makes it difficult therefore to provide an overall conclusion.

It's suggested that about one in three people respond better to these isoflavones than others, because they are able to convert one of the isoflavones, daidzein (which is also in red clover extracts, below), into equol, a more potent oestrogenic substance.

Red clover isoflavones Like soy, red clover is a legume rich in isoflavones. There is some evidence it works, but it's not conclusive. While a few small studies, of questionable quality and/or funded by the manufacturer, concluded it was effective in reducing symptoms, a placebo was also found to be effective. An analysis of results pooled from all available studies found there was no difference between red clover supplements and a placebo.

The market-leading red clover product in Australia is Novogen Promensil.

Other herbs Dong quai root, licorice root, maca, evening primrose oil, Vitex agnus-castes (chaste tree), sage leaf, wild yam root (in tablets and topical creams) and ginseng are found in menopause herbal treatments, with a strong history of use in traditional medicine. However, scientific evidence for their effectiveness is lacking. A very small, short-term study of maca found it reduced anxiety and depression in menopausal women. A study of dong quai found it was no better than a placebo, but in Chinese medicine it's usually combined with other herbs.

In preparations that include a number of different ingredients there's some concern that interactions between the herbs may result in the alteration of effects. Some of the more effective herbs may be cancelled out by a blocking effect of others. On the other hand, effects may be enhanced. So when individual herbs are tested and show an effect, they may not show the same effect when combined with other herbs.

When we asked companies that promote mixed herbal remedies to provide evidence for their products, they didn't include any clinical studies showing the effects of the herbs together (see Reviewing the Evidence, page 32). Rather, they provided evidence for the efficacy of single ingredients, so we cannot comment on the potential efficacy of the products as a whole. >

In recent years sales of HRT alternatives have boomed, with more than half of all menopausal women taking some form of alternative therapy.

If you're tempted to try combating symptoms with herbal remedies, be aware that taking too many may be detrimental.

Good quality clinical trials needed

Unfortunately, due to the poor quality of studies, it's difficult to say with certainty whether any of the mixed herbal remedies are effective. Studies tend to have small numbers, be only short term (12 weeks is typical), and sometimes lack a placebo comparison group. A placebo can reduce hot flushes – the most-studied symptom – by about 50%, so if a particular herb is shown to reduce them, it must also be shown to be more effective than a placebo. Even when herbal medicines are shown to have a significant effect in reducing hot flushes, it might mean the difference between having an average of four per day compared to two or three per day. HRT, on the other hand, reduces them by about 80%. Some studies have concluded that herbal medicines appear to be of more benefit to women with lots of hot flushes, because the effects will be more noticeable.

There are no immediate concerns about the safety of the better-known herbal products, however there have been isolated cases of liver damage associated with black cohosh, although whether it was the cause is unclear. Also, the possibility that oestrogenic herbs may have an effect on breast cancer cells means these two treatments can't be regarded as 100% safe. If you're tempted to try herbal medicines, be aware that more isn't necessarily better, and can in fact be detrimental.

Reviewing the evidence

We approached 13 companies that market herbal treatments that claim to relieve the symptoms of menopause, and asked them to provide evidence for these claims – eight responded. One, Totally Natural Products, declined to provide information. The five companies who did not respond are Ethical Nutrients, Greenridge, Microgenics, Nature's Way and Naturopathica (MenoEze).

Evidence from Blackmores, Flordis, Herron, Novogen and Schaper & Brummer was mainly in the form of clinical trials showing their respective active ingredients were effective. However, as highlighted in Herbal Menopause Remedies on page 30, some studies have found these ingredients not so effective.

Clear Menopause and Fusion Health Menopause Free are multi-ingredient preparations with several active ingredients. The evidence provided by these companies was mainly in the form of references to traditional herbal pharmacopaeias. There were some references to clinical trials, but for individual ingredients only, so if you want to use either of them you won't know if the product as sold has been proven to work in clinical trials. ■

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Clinical trials in China of Chinese herbal medicines have found them very effective in reducing the symptoms of menopause. As traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) becomes more popular in the West, Chinese herbs are becoming more widely researched.

The main stumbling block for TCM in Western evidence-based medicine is that there's no one-size-fits-all formulation that can be tested for its ability to treat particular symptoms. Some companies have attempted to make a standard Chinese medicine formulation in a pill or similar, based on a combination of typically used herbs. One study of such a preparation showed it was no more effective than a placebo.

However, this doesn't surprise TCM experts, who argue that women experience menopause differently and require different herbal combinations. A qualified TCM practitioner assesses each woman and her symptoms' profile and prescribes particular herbs accordingly. Studies conducted in China operate the same way; they look at herbal preparations (which are raw herbs, not pills) and they are altered over the course of the study according to individual responses – a very different approach from Western clinical trials.

Tried everything

Kerry's story of a 16-year search for safe and effective treatment of menopausal symptoms is typical of many CHOICE has received from women who've experienced symptoms over a long period of time.

"With the hot flushes, which seemed like they were boiling my brain, and a feeling like there were things crawling all over my skin I sought help from a doctor and was given HRT, which made my life quite bearable," says Kerry.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KERRY

"However, concerned this was not a good thing long term, I was always on the lookout for anything else that might help. I spent a long time with a herbalist trying everything she had to offer. My next stop was with a naturopath and again I tried everything. In between I would go back on HRT. I moved on to the Chinese herbalist and acupuncturist. Again it did not do much to relieve the symptoms. At other times I tried wild yam cream and also introduced soy into my diet. I do yoga and exercise.

"My current doctor has been trying to get me off the HRT for the last few years and I have been cutting down and putting up with mild hot flushes and palpitations. I stopped HRT a few months ago and am currently taking a soy isoflavone pill and black cohosh. However, my hot flushes came back and I have slept very little. Now I'm wondering if it is worth trying some of the other products available at the chemist, or if I should go back to the doctor."

BIO-IDENTICAL OR NATURAL HORMONES

Uncomfortable with taking so-called synthetic hormones in HRT, many women prefer the idea of natural or bio-identical hormones. Some swear by them, finding they're very effective at relieving menopause symptoms. A doctor tests your blood or saliva for hormone levels and tops them up to so-called natural levels by having a compounding pharmacist tailor-make a preparation for you.

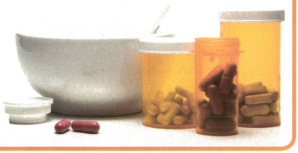
They're more expensive than HRT, partly because they're not subsidised by the government. And some medical authorities, including the Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health warn against them.

The main risk with bio-identical hormones is that they're not regulated in the same way as other hormonal treatments, and the pharmacists making the preparations aren't required to abide by the conduct codes of Medicines Australia (the peak body for pharmaceutical companies).

They could be ineffective, or worse, dangerous. One major concern is uterine cancer, due to the ineffectiveness of progesterone in opposing the effects of oestrogen on the endometrium. Several such cases have been reported.

Legal loopholes mean they may also contain hormones that aren't approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for use in Australia. Critics also point out that just because the hormones come from natural sources such as yam or soy, by the time the active hormone is extracted it's chemically no different from the equivalent so-called synthetic hormone in HRT, which also happens to be extracted from natural sources – yam, soy or horse urine.

The TGA is considering regulating compounding pharmacists, and hormones that are not approved by the regulator would be banned.



ISTOCKPHOTO

PRODUCT (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)	INGREDIENTS	COST PER DAY ($)*	EVIDENCE SUPPLIED**
Blackmores Phytolife	Soy isoflavones, calcium	0.89	Yes
Clear Menopause	Epimedium sagittatum, Curculigo orchoides, Morinda officinalis, Angelica polymorpha, Viscum coloratum, Eucommia ulmoides, Lycium chinense, Chrysanthemum sinense, Phellodendron amurense, Anemarrhena asphodeloides	1.90-2.85	Yes
Totally Natural Products Estro Balance plus Vitex	Soy isoflavones, Vitex agnus castus, sage leaf, Astragalus, Motherwort, Withania, vitamins C, E, B6, citrus bioflavonoids	1.17-3.50	No
Ethical Nutrients Menopause Support	Black cohosh, soy isoflavones	0.90	No
Flordis Femular	Black cohosh	0.57	Yes
Fusion Health Menopause Free	Dong quai, vitex agnus castus, Pueraria lobata, Anemarrhena asphodeloides, Epimedium sagittatum, Phellodendron amurense, Morinda officinalis,	1.29	Yes
Greenridge Femitone (liquid)	Black cohosh, red clover isoflavones, licorice root, sage leaf, wild yam root, Korean ginseng	2.96	No
Herron Menopause Relief	Soy isoflavones, vitamin D3, Vitamin K, boron, calcium		Yes
Microgenics Hot Flush	Dong quai, sage leaf, Asparugus racemosa (shatavari), Zizyphus spinosa (jujube)	1.33	No
Nature's Way Menopause Day & Night	Black cohosh, soy isoflavones, red clover isoflavones, dong quai, Vitex agnus castus, wild yam root, calcium, magnesium, valerian	1.03	No
Naturopathica MenoEze	Black cohosh, soy isoflavones, red clover isoflavones, dong quai, licorice root, sage leaf, Vitex agnus castus, wild yam root, Korean ginseng	0.80-1.60	No
Novogen Promensil	Red clover isoflavones	0.94	Yes
Schaper & Brummer Remifemin	Black cohosh	0.62	Yes

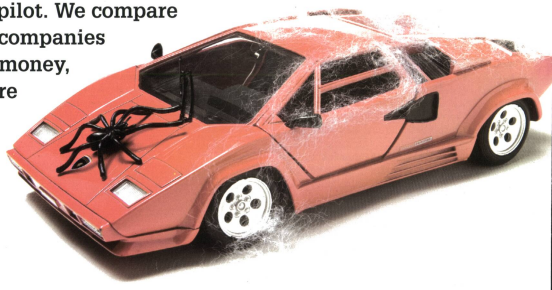
TABLE NOTES

** Based on dosage information provided and price paid in October 2008.*

*** See Reviewing the Evidence, page 32, for more.*

Insuring for a future

Renewing your auto insurance shouldn't be done on auto-pilot. We compare 21 car insurance companies to help you save money, especially if you're driving less these days.



nutshell

- CHOICE surveyed 21 insurance companies offering comprehensive car insurance and found average differences of between $440 and $1500 per year.
- Several companies offer discounts for low kilometres driven. This means you save not only on petrol but also on your car insurance.

If it seems like too much time and bother to compare car insurance policies, CHOICE's latest survey results might make you think again. Not only did we find major cost savings on policies, but we also uncovered new tailored products that reward those who drive less.

Our survey of 21 insurance companies shows the best savings on comprehensive car insurance can be made simply by shopping around. We found average savings per year of up to:

- $1500 for a young driver
- $1030 for a family with a young driver
- $495 for an adult driver
- $440 for an older driver

For more on our scenarios and recommended policies, see the table on page 36-37.

Did you know

Car thefts are decreasing Five years ago, about one in every 150 comprehensively insured cars was stolen or broken into and a similar number had a windscreen claim, according to Insurance Statistics Australia. In the 12 months to June 2008, however, thefts were down to about one in every 300 cars and windscreen damage was up to about one in every 60. The rate of accidents stayed the same, unfortunately – about one in every seven cars.

The average insurance payout was about $7150 per theft, $2860 per accident and $310 per windscreen. This shows how important it is to have a policy with $0 windscreen excess. Only HBA, Mutual Community, RAA and TIO include this for no extra cost; see the table on page 36-37.

Save on petrol and car insurance

Fluctuating petrol prices have hurt household budgets, so now is a good time to look at ways to reduce your car use. Indeed, the emerging trend of driving less has not been lost on enterprising insurers. Of the companies we surveyed, Allianz, Apia, CGU, HBA and Mutual Community give discounts for low kilometres, but conditions apply. Real Insurance has even designed a new policy called Pay As You Drive (PAYD). As the name suggests, and so long as the main driver is at least 25 years old, it's based on the simple premise that the less you drive, the higher your discount.

How it works The premium is based on an estimate of the kilometres you'll drive during the following year. If you drive less than you estimated, PAYD allows you to roll over what's left – or refunds part of the premium if you decide not to renew the policy. You need to keep track of how much you drive: if you reach the limit you need to pay an extra amount before you drive any further.

Trap PAYD may not agree to extend the kilometres if, for example, you no longer meet their underwriting guidelines because of changes to your driving record. In this case, or if you forget to top up, you will only have Third Party Fire and Theft cover (see Buying Guide, page 38) for the rest of the year.

To check how much you can save, we asked PAYD to quote for potential policy holders who drive between 20,000km (family) and 15,000km (adult driver and older driver) per year, as well as a second quote for 5000km driven per year.

We found that while PAYD offers a discount of up to 55% on average when the kilometres driven are reduced from 20,000km to 5000km/year, in some scenarios the cheapest insurers quoting for the higher kilometres were still cheaper than PAYD's quotes for reduced kilometres – so it's still important to shop around.

Trap PAYD calculates your premium differently from other insurers and does not use a no-claim bonus (NCB). While its quotes still compare well, no NCB means you cannot protect your risk rating and may potentially have to pay a much higher premium should you have an at-fault claim. Your next premium will also be affected if you have a collision with an animal or your car is stolen.

However, other insurers do this as well: even with a protected NCB, if you make just one at-fault claim, Budget Direct, NRMA, RACV, SGIC and SGIO will not change your NCB but may still increase your premium at the next renewal, as they may deem you a higher risk.

Verdict If you drive fewer than average kilometres and make sure you top up if necessary, it's a good idea to get a quote from PAYD – phone 13 72 93 or go to www.payasyoudrive.com.au for more information.

Real Insurance also offers a comprehensive policy with similar policy features to PAYD for drivers who drive an average amount of kilometres.

What to buy

The policies that CHOICE recommends – see the table on page 36-37 – have a policy score of 70% or more.

Go to your scenario to see which has a competitive premium in your state. Make sure the features fit your requirements – you may want to be able to choose your own repairer, or if you live in a country area you may need $0 excess for windscreen damage.

Finally, get at least three quotes for comparison. If possible, get some online quotes as they may be cheaper.

Your car and greenhouse gases

In 2005, transport accounted for more than 14% of Australia's national greenhouse gas emissions, with about half coming from passenger cars. Transport emissions have increased by 30% since 1990 and are one of the biggest sources of emissions increase in Australia.

As well as driving less, another way to reduce the environmental impact of your car is to offset your emissions by buying carbon offsets, which usually pay for projects that remove greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide from the atmosphere or stop them getting there in the first place. Offset projects range from renewable energy, such as solar or wind energy, to tree planting but the market is unregulated and it's important to choose an accredited retailer. For more on carbon offset schemes see *CHOICE* November 2008. >

The emerging trend of driving less has not been lost on insurers; the new PAYD policy is based on the simple premise that the less you drive, the higher your discount.

From zero to maximum no-claim bonus

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOUISA

When Louisa from Victoria wanted to comprehensively insure her new car, the first insurer she called only offered her an expensive premium – a zero no-claim bonus. Louisa had a clean driving record but hadn't had comprehensive insurance for some time, as she had driven a work car. She had previously owned older cars that weren't worth much and therefore only used third party cover.

She shopped around and the third insurer she rang, AAMI, offered to give her a maximum no-claim bonus for life once she provided a letter from her employer proving she had driven a fleet car without incident.

CAR INSURER CONTACTS

- AAMI, 13 22 44, www.aami.com.au
- Allianz, 13 10 00, www.allianz.com.au
- Ansvar Insurance, 1300 650 540, www.ansvar.com.au
- Apia, 13 50 50, www.apia.com.au
- Budget Direct, 1800 724 668, www.budgetdirect.com.au
- CGU, 13 15 32, www.cgu.com.au
- CommInsure, 13 24 23, www.comminsure.com.au
- GIO, 13 10 10, www.gio.com.au
- HBA , 13 12 43, www.hba.com.au
- HBF, 13 34 23, www.hbf.com.au
- Mutual Community, 13 12 43, www.mutualcommunity.com.au
- NRMA, 13 21 32, www.nrma.com.au
- QBE, 13 37 23, www.qbe.com.au
- RAA , 1300 884 567, www.raa.net
- RAC , 13 17 03, www.rac.com.au
- RACT, 13 27 22, www.ract.com.au
- RACV, 13 72 28, www.racv.com.au
- Real Insurance, 1300 007 325, www.realinsurance.com.au
- SGIC, 13 32 33, www.sgic.com.au
- SGIO, 13 32 33, www.sgio.com.au
- Suncorp, 13 11 55, www.suncorp.com.au
- TIO, 1300 301 833, www.tiofi.com.au

PRODUCT		POLICY SCORE	STATES WITH A COMPETITIVELY PRICED PREMIUM			
Policy (in order of policy score)	States / areas available	Policy score (%)	Young driver	Adult driver	Family with young driver	Older driver
RECOMMENDED POLICIES						
RAA	SA, Broken Hill	90		SA		SA
Suncorp	All but Tas	86		NSW, NT, SA, Vic	NSW, NT, SA	NSW, NT, SA, Vic, WA
RACT	Tas	85				
GIO	ACT, NSW, NT, Vic, WA	84		NSW, NT, Vic	NSW, NT	NSW, NT, Vic, WA
HBA	All but NT, SA	82	Qld	ACT, NSW		ACT, NSW
Mutual Community	NT, SA	82	NT, SA			
CGU	All	80		NSW, Tas		Tas, WA
NRMA	ACT, NSW, Qld, Tas	79	ACT, NSW, Qld, Tas	NSW, Tas	NSW	ACT, NSW, Tas
RACV	Vic	79	Vic			Vic
SGIC	SA	79	SA		SA	
SGIO	WA	79	WA	WA	WA	WA
CommInsure	All	78	ACT, WA	All	ACT, Qld, WA	All but Tas, Vic
HBF	WA	75	WA	WA	WA	
Allianz Surecover Gold	All	74	NT			NT
Allianz Surecover Plus	All	74	ACT, NT, Tas	ACT, NT		ACT, NT, Qld, Tas
Ansvar Insurance	All	72		Qld, Tas		Qld
APIA (A)	All	70				
OTHER POLICIES						
QBE	All but NT	67	SA, Vic, WA		Vic	
RAC	WA	64	WA	WA		WA
TIO	NT	60	NT	NT	NT	
AAMI	All but ACT, NSW	59	NT, Qld, Vic	All but ACT, NSW	All but ACT, NSW	Qld, SA, Tas, Vic
AAMI	ACT, NSW	58	ACT, NSW	ACT, NSW	ACT, NSW	ACT, NSW
Budget Direct	All but NT	50	All but NT	All but NT	All but NT	All but NT

USING THE TABLE

Policy score This is based on an evaluation of the policy's features. In particular, we took into account features that CHOICE readers had told us were important (many are listed in the table), as well as general cover, convenience and traps.

States with a competitively priced premium is an analysis of premiums collected from the companies in September 2008 for four scenarios:

- **Young driver** Male driver aged 21, driving a 2004 Hyundai Accent 10,000km per year.
- **Family car** Husband aged 48, wife aged 45 and daughter 19 (parents on maximum NCB), driving a 2005 Holden Commodore 20,000km per year.
- **Adult driver** Couple/single person aged 38, or family with small children, maximum NCB discount, driving a 2007 Mazda3 15,000km per year.
- **Older driver** Couple/single person aged 60, maximum NCB discount, driving a 2007 Toyota Camry 15,000km per year.

Premiums were collected for two suburbs in each state with different demographics. The company is recommended for a scenario in a state when its average quote was lower than the average quote across all companies in this state for the scenario.

Quotes vary depending on a range of factors, including the make and model of your car, age, gender, driving history of all regular drivers and location. So while our analysis of premiums may not exactly match your circumstances, use it as a starting point for shopping around.

If our analysis of premiums does not match your situation exactly, you can use it as a starting point for shopping around.

FEATURES

Agreed or market value	Free rental car after theft (days or $)	14 days' car rental after accident	$0 excess for windscreen	Personal property cover if car is stolen ($)*	Free car if new car is written off (up to age of car in months)	Free repair service (insurer handles claim)	Choice of repairer	Free NCB protection after 12 months on maximum NCB**	24-hour helpline	Public liability cover limit ($ million)	Pay monthly for no extra charge
Either (B)	21	Opt	√	500	24		√	√	√	20	√
Either	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√	After 3 yrs	√	20	
Agreed	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√	√	√	20	
Agreed (C)	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	14		√	500	24-36 (G)		√	√	√	20	√
Either	14		√	500	24-36 (G)		√	√	√	20	√
Either	14		Opt	500	24-36 (G)	√	√	After 3 yrs	√	20	√
Either	21	Opt	Opt		24	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	21	Opt	Opt		24	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	21	Opt	Opt		24	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	21	Opt	Opt		24	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√		√	20	
Agreed	Up to $600	Opt	(F)	500	24	√	√		√	20	
Either	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√		√	20	
Either	14	Opt	Opt	500	24	√	√		√	20	
Market	14		$100 excess	500	12	√	√	√	√	20	
Either	21			750	24	√		After 3 yrs	√	20	√
Either	14	Opt	Opt		(H)	√			√	30	
Agreed	14	Opt	(F)		12	√	√		√	25	
Market	Up to $1000 (D)		√	300	12	Darwin only	√	√	√	20	√
Either (B)	14	(E)	Opt		12	√		After 3 yrs	√	20	
Agreed	14	(E)	Opt		12	√		After 3 yrs	√	20	
Either (C)	14	Opt	Opt $40 excess		12	√	√			20	

TABLE NOTES

Bingle and RACQ declined our invitation to confirm their policy features, so we were unable to include them.
Opt Optional, which means this cover isn't included in the premium but is available for an extra fee.
** Cash is usually excluded.*
*** NCB No-claim bonus. For more, see How to Save on Your Premium, page 36.*
(A) Designed for older drivers (50+); for details check with the insurer.
(B) The higher of the two.
(C) For some cars, only market value is available.
(D) First three days not covered.
(E) Discounted rental car.
(F) Yes, if you're on the maximum NCB.
(G) There's a limit of 30,000km in the first 24 months and 50,000km between 24 and 36 months.
(H) Up to 20,000 km; optional cover is available for four years.

CHOICE ONLINE
For our interactive tool with more detailed policy profiles go to www.choice.com.au/money.

A number of CHOICE members report they have found cheaper quotes online than on their regular renewal notices.

Buying guide

Comprehensive insurance gives your car the highest cover option but is also the most expensive.

Comprehensive car insurance covers accidents, theft, natural events (such as flood or hail), malicious damage and vandalism. It even covers your car if an accident was your fault. If your car isn't worth much, you could consider cheaper third-party insurance instead (on top of compulsory CTP or Green Slip insurance).

- **Third party property** covers you for the damage you may cause to another car.
- **Third party property, fire and theft** also covers you if your car is stolen or burnt.

Both types of insurance may include limited cover (usually up to $3000) for damage caused to your car by an uninsured driver who doesn't pay for the damage. However, if you later wish to comprehensively insure a new car, you may have trouble getting your clean driving history recognised: see From Zero to Maximum No-Claim Bonus, page 35.

With a comprehensive insurance policy, you decide how you want to specify what your car is worth in the event it's written off – you can use either market or agreed value. Most insurers offer both.

- **Market value** The car's value decreases in line with the value or condition of the car. The amount you receive is determined by the insurer at the time of a claim.
- **Agreed value** You and the insurer agree on a value of the car that's fixed until the next renewal.

Trap Teresa from Western Australia told us about her daughter's experience with a market value policy from CGU. The car was hit by another driver at a roundabout and written off. Since the car was serviced regularly and had only low kilometres, its value was well above average. Looking at the purchase price for a comparable car, Teresa's daughter discovered she had ended up $1500-$2000 out of pocket with the refund provided by CGU.

What's covered?

Policies differ in the following features:

Car hire for a set number of days or amount Policies usually cover car hire, some up to 21 days, if yours is stolen. Some also offer car hire after an accident at extra cost, while others a discount on rental rates.

Personal property If your personal property in the car is damaged during an accident, most companies include some cover for its replacement. However, not all provide for this in the case of theft: cover is usually limited to a set amount up to $750, and you may not be covered for all items. Cash is rarely covered.

New car If your new car is written off, you're usually covered for a replacement vehicle. If you have a new car, choose a policy that covers it for at least 24 months; some policies cover 24 to 36 months, but they usually set a kilometre limit.

Choice of repairer This is offered by all of our recommended insurers except APIA.

How to save on your premium

It pays to shop around. We found average differences on the annual premium of up to:

- $1500 for a young driver
- $1030 for a family with a young driver
- $495 for an adult driver
- $440 for an older driver

Tip Check your renewal notice against the online quote from your insurer; a number of CHOICE members reported they found a cheaper online quote. Peter from Melbourne is insured with Budget Direct. His last renewal notice was 13% higher than the previous premium, even though he hadn't made a claim. Peter checked the online quote and found it was 15% cheaper. When he called the insurer, it agreed to match the online quote.

There are other ways to reduce the premium:

No-claim bonus (NCB) This can save you up to 70% on the premium. You usually need to be continually insured and not make any claims for five to six years before you get the maximum NCB.

Excess A fixed dollar amount you'll pay on most claims. Most companies allow you to lower or remove the excess for a higher premium, or increase it to reduce the premium.

Restricted drivers Some companies give you a discount on the premium if you nominate certain drivers only or restrict the use of your car to drivers over a certain age, such as 25.

Discounts For new low kilometre discounts see Save on Petrol and Car Insurance, page 34. Other discounts can include multipolicy, loyalty, security, pensioner discounts and discounts for paying an annual instead of monthly premium. ■

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.

Inside

40 **Dishwashers**

44 **Cordless phones**

48 **Media players**

Plus

52 **Vacuum cleaners**
56 **Kettles**
59 **HD set-top boxes**

For more product tests go to www.choice.com.au

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so that we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE Best Buy CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy CHOICE calls a product a Green Buy if it delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.

CHOICE Video When you see the CHOICE Video icon, you can find more information about that story at www.choice.com.au.

Sensing inequality

Dishwashers with auto-sensors are not new to the market, but our research shows they're not all equal.

nutshell

- Almost half the models on test have auto-sensing programs, but only six brands do it reasonably well.
- Details on the new and unique Fisher & Paykel dishwasher with only one program.

An auto-sensor is meant to optimise the amount of energy, water, time and temperature needed to get the dishes squeaky clean, saving on utilities and money in the long run. Almost half the models on test claim to have an auto-sensing program, all of which use dirt sensors (also known as optical or turbidity sensors). These measure how much light passes through the water or how much bounces back off the dirt – some do both. The less light (or more for the latter) that reaches the measuring point, the dirtier the water. The machine then adjusts water, temperature, energy and/or time accordingly. Some machines continually sense and adjust for changing dirt levels whereas others only do it once.

The Bosch, Maytag, Fisher & Paykel DW60DOX1 and most Miele models on test noticeably reduce the water, energy and time when washing cleaner dishes. Both Asko models only reduced their energy and time but used very little water to begin with, while the Miele G 1023 and Kleenmaid DW46i lowered their water use and time. The Electrolux E:line EX401ISB, Smeg STH905 and all the AEG and Blanco models made no significant adjustments to water, energy or time during the auto-sensor wash.

Although some dishwashers with sensing programs that work well appear at the top of the table, their washing scores are not the best. If you rinse before stacking the dishwasher, energy and water are more important than washing scores so these models would be good options. For those who don't rinse, good washing scores are more important than water and energy, so a sensor model further down the table may be a better option. You could also use your own senses to select the right program – a fast wash for lightly soiled dishes or a normal/intensive program if you don't rinse or you wash every other day.

Simply sensor

The Fisher & Paykel DW60DOX1 is unique because auto-sensing is the only program available. The dishwasher takes between 10 and 30 minutes to sense what program it needs to use, from five preset options: intensive, daily, economy, normal and quick.

The sensor seems to work OK. In our washing tests it chose intensive once and the daily program twice (results listed are for the daily program only). When we tested with clean dishes it chose the normal program – a light wash, although we would have expected the quick wash. However, it never chose an economy program, which is the one used for the energy label. A quick wash also takes at least 80 minutes to complete. >

What to look for

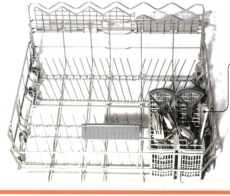
DISHWASHER BASICS

- Will your **normal dinnerware** fit into the dishwasher without crowding or hitting the spray arms? Take a few of your day-to-day dishes, such as a large dinner plate and tall glass, and try them out in the store to see they both fit at the same time. Spin the spray arms to make sure they don't hit the plate or glass.

USEFUL FEATURES

- **Fold-down/removable plate racks** These can help when loading pots and awkward items. Fold-down types are easier as they don't need external storage space when you are not using them.
- **Anti-flood hose** This type of hose has an electric cut-off near the water tap connection, which means it stops leaks in the hose, not just in the machine. An anti-flood hose is high-level protection.
- A **concealed heating element** stops items being damaged if they fall through the basket – particularly plastics – and also means food can't drop onto the element and cause a burning smell.
- **Controls and labelling** The controls should be easy to use and the labelling intuitive and clear. Look for engraved or etched labels on stainless steel so they don't come off when cleaning. Only use water and a microfibre cloth on bonded labelling.

Easily adjustable top basket Most top baskets are height-adjustable, but if it's an "easy-adjust" system you can do it without removing the basket and refitting it in a lower or higher position. Only a few can be adjusted when loaded.



Cutlery basket An anti-nesting grid helps stop the cutlery pieces from nesting so they are washed better. Look for a cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the bottom basket for loading versatility.

What to buy

Most machines scored well overall, so any model with a good wash score will suit your purposes. If you rinse first, machines with a lower wash score will be acceptable. See the table on page 42 for details.

79% ASKO D3122

PRICE $1399

GOOD POINTS*

- Excellent drying performance and very good water efficiency.
- Has a child lock and a concealed element.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

79% BOSCH SGS46M62AU

PRICE $1399

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent drying performance and water efficiency.
- Has "time-to-go" display, child lock for the controls and a concealed element.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK washing score.

79% BOSCH SHV55M43AU

PRICE $1859

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent drying score.
- Very good water efficiency score.
- Delayed start and concealed element.
- Easy-lift top basket.
- Baking sheet spray head attachment.

BAD POINTS

- No time-remaining indicator when door is closed.
- Expensive.

79% MIELE G 1243 SC

PRICE $1799

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent drying performance.
- Easy-lift top basket.
- It has delayed-start, "time-to-go" display, a child lock on the door and a concealed element.

BAD POINTS

- Expensive.

HOW WE TEST

To see how we test dishwashers go to www.choice.com.au/dishwashers or see our last dishwasher report in *CHOICE* July 2008.

About the rest

This refers only to the newly tested models – to find out more about machines tested in the past, see the table on page 42.

- The Kleenmaid DW46i is excellent for water and drying efficiency, and is quiet, but only scored 63% for washing performance. One bonus is a cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the bottom basket.
- The Westinghouse SB908WL is very good for drying and water efficiency, but is a high user of energy.
- The Asko D3132 uses a tiny 11L of water, but scored only 63% for washing performance and 66% for energy use.
- The Kleenmaid DW28X and Whirlpool ADP7000 are very good for water and energy use but not as good for drying.
- The single control Fisher & Paykel DW60DDX1 is very water-efficient and quiet, but not so easy on the energy. See Simply Sensor on page 40 for more details.
- The Maytag MJD 7556 is excellent for drying and is very water efficient, but not as good for washing and energy use.
- The AEG F86080Fum is one of the best models for washing performance and good for drying, but is a high user of energy and water.
- The Miele G1173SCVi is very good for drying, but only scored 57% for energy.
- The Blanco BFD5X and Haier HDW300SS are excellent for water efficiency, but only scored 50% and 52% respectively for washing. The Haier scored lowest for drying, however the Blanco is the quickest.
- The Fisher & Paykel DW60CDW2 is also very water efficient, but poor for drying. Our testers noted that the fold-down tines move as you load the plates, and the bottom drawer is difficult to roll in or out when loaded.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the newly tested models for suitability for people with certain disabilities.

- For someone with upper limb dysfunction, the AEG F86080Fum, Blanco BFD5X, Westinghouse SB908WL and Miele G1173SCVi models are best as they are easy to use and have easy-to-open doors, although the Miele's door may depend on the décor panel the user installs.
- For the vision-impaired, the Blanco BFD5X and Miele G1173SCVi have the best contrast between their various internal components, including the detergent and rinse aid dispensers (the Miele being a little better). The Blanco's controls are slightly better visually and audibly.
- For those with cognitive impairment any new models bar the Blanco, Maytag and Whirlpool machines would be suitable.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE										FEATURES						
Brand / model (in rank order)*	Overall score (%)	Washing performance score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Drying performance score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Water used (L)	Energy used (kWh)	Noise (dB)	Cycle time (min)		Auto program / dirt sensor	Easily height-adjustable top basket	Foldable / removable tines	Anti-flood hose	Half-load option	Eco wash	Fast wash
Asko D3122	79	74	82	97	60	17	1.63	50	148							√	√
Bosch Lifestyle Automatic SGS46M62AU (A) (B)	79	66	93	91	72	13	1.22	43	100		√	√	F				√
Bosch Lifestyle Automatic SHV55M43AU (A)	79	70	89	91	70	14	1.31	41	111		√	√	F	√			√
Miele G 1243 SC	79	76	79	97	66	18	1.44	41	144		√	√	F, R	√			√
#Kleenmaid DW46i	78	63	94	94	71	12	1.26	41	109		√	√	F	√	√		
AEG F40760 Favorit Sensorlogic (C)	78	88	61	91	60	25	1.62	48	115		√	√	F	√		√	√
Conia CDW1211	78	72	81	86	77	17	1.07	54	149			√	F, R			√	√
Dishlex DX103WK	77	78	72	95	57	21	1.73	48	113							√	√
Fisher & Paykel Dishdrawer DD605ZW (D)	77	64	88	91	73	15	1.19	48	112			na	R		√	√	√
Fisher & Paykel Dishdrawer DS605ZW (E)	77	64	88	91	73	7	0.60	48	112			na	R		√	√	√
Miele G 2243 SCi (F)	77	74	77	94	65	19	1.48	41	142		√	√	F, R	√			√
Whirlpool ADP6000WH	77	64	84	92	79	16	1.02	49	149			√	F	√		√	
#Westinghouse SB908WL (G)	76	73	80	87	65	18	1.45	47	99							√	√
Bosch Classic Electronic SGU53E75AU (A) (H)	76	70	92	58	86	13	0.77	48	141				F				√
#Asko D3132	75	63	98	79	66	11	1.43	46	171		√		F			√	√
#Fisher & Paykel DW60D0X1	75	69	88	78	64	15	1.49	36	147		√	√	F	√		√ (P)	√ (
#Kleenmaid DW39X	75	73	83	66	80	17	0.95	50	148				F				√
#Maytag MJD 7556	75	62	88	90	69	14	1.32	47	171		√	√	F	√	√		√
Blanco BFD10X	75	65	86	91	64	15	1.49	43	105		√	√	F	√		√	√
Smeg STH905 (J)	75	59	99	80	74	10	1.16	45	101		√	na	F	√	√	√	√
Baumatic BAD6002 (K)	74	61	85	78	83	16	0.88	53	135			√	F		√		√
Electrolux E:line EX401ISB (A)	74	81	61	86	59	25	1.66	49	116		√	√	F	√		√	√
#AEG F86080Fum (L)	73	85	59	77	61	26	1.60	43	112		√	√	F	√		√	√
#Miele G1173SCVi	73	73	76	82	57	19	1.74	45	143		√	√	F	√			√
#Whirlpool ADP7000	73	75	84	51	81	16	0.93	53	130			√	F	√	√		√
Ariston L64X (A)	73	65	88	69	72	15	1.25	49	87				F			√	√
Electrolux Gallery ESL6143 (A)	73	81	61	83	56	25	1.76	50	108			√	F	√		√	√
Miele G 1143 SC	73	78	69	77	58	22	1.71	42	145		√	√	F	√			√
Blanco BFD9W (M)	72	68	83	74	64	16	1.51	45	103		√	√	F	√		√	√
Miele G 1023	72	67	77	81	65	19	1.48	43	134		√	√	F	√			√
Smeg SA8605 X	70	76	77	55	64	19	1.5	47	105			√	F	√	√	√	
#Blanco BFD5W	69	50	99	71	69	11	1.35	42	66			√	F	√	√	√	√
LG LD-1204W1 (A)	69	62	83	50	88	16	0.71	46	110				F		√	√	√
Haier HDW100WHT (N)	67	52	97	40	89	11	0.67	55	96								√
#Fisher & Paykel DW60CDW2	64	58	83	45	75	16	1.14	50	108			√	F			√	√
#Haier HDW300SS (A)	64	52	97	37	79	11	0.99	59	97				F		√		√

SPECIFICATIONS						COSTS	
Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Water connection	Place settings	Type*	Colour*	Contact	Running cost ($ / 10 years)	Price ($)
2 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	BI	w	www.asko.com.au	1083	1399
1 x 60 x 60	C only	14	FW	w	www.bosch.com.au	804	1399
6 x 60 x 55	C rec	14	BI (FI)	FI	www.bosch.com.au	862	1859
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	w	www.miele.com.au	962	1799
6 x 60 x 55	C only	14	BI (SI)	ss	www.kleenmaid.com.au	845	2599
5 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	w	www.andico.com.au	1098	1099
5 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	w	www.pebble-ltd.com.au	725	499
5 x 60 x 61	C rec	12	FW	w	www.dishlex.com.au	1148	689
2 x 60 x 57	C rec	12	BI	w	www.fp.com.au	813	1799
1 X 60 X 57	C rec	6	BI	w	www.fp.com.au	407	1029
5 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI (SI)	w	www.miele.com.au	985	1999
5 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	w	www.whirlpool.com.au	711	879
2 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	w	www.westinghouse.com.au	990	849
1 x 60 x 57	C only	14	BI	w	www.bosch.com.au	527	1249
2 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	BI (SI)	w	www.asko.com.au	947	1499
2 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	ss	www.fp.com.au	1048	1210
1 x 60 x 55	C only	14	BI (SI)	ss	www.kleenmaid.com.au	651	1999
2 x 60 x 59	H or C	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.whirlpool.com.au	871	1599
2 x 60 x 57	C rec	13	FW	w	www.blanco-australia.com	997	1899
8 x 86 x 55	C only	12	BI	w	www.smeg-australia.com	758	2990
5 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	w	www.thinkappliances.com.au	605	1099
2 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI (SI)	ss	www.electrolux.com.au	1118	1379
2 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	ss	www.andico.com.au	1084	1599
1 x 60 x 57	H or C	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.miele.com.au	1171	1699
2 x 60 x 54	H or C	12	BI (FI)	FI	www.whirlpool.com.au	686	1079
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	ss	www.aristonchannel.com	827	1099
2 x 60 x 56	C rec	12	BI	w	www.electrolux.com.au	1182	1159
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	w	www.miele.com.au	1140	1599
2 x 60 x 57	H or C	13	FW	w	www.blanco-australia.com	1009	1499
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	w	www.miele.com.au	985	1099
6 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	w	www.smeg-australia.com	998	1590
2 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	w	www.blanco-australia.com	874	999
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	w	www.lge.com.au	512	799
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	w	www.haier.com.au	458	479
5 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	w	www.fp.com.au	770	836
5 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	ss	www.haier.com.au	671	799

USING THE TABLE

# Indicates a newly tested model.

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Washing performance: 40%
- Water efficiency: 25%
- Drying performance: 20%
- Energy efficiency: 15%

Noise All the dishwashers are fairly quiet, but a difference of 3dB is noticeable to the human ear.

Features See What to Look For, page 40.

Water connection

- **H or C** You can connect the dishwasher to hot or cold water.
- **C rec** The manufacturer recommends connecting to a cold tap, and the dishwasher heats the water itself (all dishwashers have a heater).
- **C only** You can only connect to a cold tap.

Type and colour

FW Freestanding, with a worktop (can generally be inbuilt as well).

BI Built-in – might not have a top or side panels; must be enclosed to prevent it from tipping forward when fully loaded and dish racks are pulled out.

Some models are also available **semi-integrated (SI)** – you fit a front panel to the door to match the rest of your kitchen cupboard doors; or **fully integrated (FI)** – the whole front of your machine can match your kitchen, with the controls hidden inside the door.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it will cost over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash a full load every day using a normal or "auto-sensing" cycle, based on 17 cents per kWh for electricity and $1 per 1000L water.

Price Recommended retail, as of October 2008.

TABLE NOTES

** Where available we've listed the basic white version and price but most have other colours or types available, usually at a higher price. Where the model numbers are different we've listed them below.*

na Not applicable; only has one basket, or in the case of the double Dishdrawer, two separate baskets whose heights don't affect each other.

ns Not stated.

ss Stainless steel.

w White.

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

(B) The Bosch SGS46M78AU and SGS46M72AU are technically similar to the SGS46M62AU, and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.

(C) The AEG F40860M, F40480IM and F60850VIM are technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.

(D) This is a double Dishdrawer. The Fisher & Paykel Dishdrawer DS605ZW, DS605SS, DS605I, DS605SM, DS605FDSM and DS605FDSS are single-drawer machines and would score the same on the tested program, but with water used at 7L and energy used at 0.60kWh.

(E) This is a single Dishdrawer.

(F) The Miele G 2243 SCu and G 2283 SCVi are technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type, colour and features.

(G) The Westinghouse SB916WI, and SB916SL are technically similar to the SB908WI, and will perform the same on the tested program. The SB916 has an anti-flood hose, fold-down racks, delay start and is claimed to be quieter.

(H) The Bosch SGS55E42AU, SGU55E55AU and SGI55E55AU are technically similar to the SGS53E75AU and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type, colour and features.

(J) The Smeg is wider and shorter than a standard dishwasher and only has one basket, but still with 12 place settings.

(K) The Lofra LOD6001 is technically similar to the Baumatic BAD6002 and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.

(L) The AEG F86070im, F86070VI and F80860 are technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.

(M) The Blanco BFD9W, BFD9X, BSD9X and BID11 are all technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type and colour.

(N) The Haier HDW100SST, HDW101WHT and HDW101SST are all technically similar and will perform the same on the tested program. Differences are type, colour and features.

(P) Cannot be selected by user. Wash cycle is chosen by auto-sensing program. See Simply Sensor, page 40, for details.

Cutting the cord

A cordless phone without an answering machine provides a simple, effective way to keep in touch at home.

nutshell

- If you have lots of electrical gadgets in the house and operate a wireless network, phones that operate on the 1.8GHz band are the best option.
- There is a significant difference in the handsets' maximum volume among the models tested.

Despite the growing number of communication channels – mobile phones, email, video calling and the like – sometimes simply making a phone call from your home phone is the best option.

CHOICE tested 13 of the latest cordless models to find out which are easy to use, deliver good quality sound and have a long range. None of the phones on test incorporate an answering machine, however most network providers offer a message bank service. All these phones are charged via a base station which receives the signal and sends it to the handset, allowing you to carry out a conversation while moving around the house. Some models have a better range than others, while some provide longer battery life before it becomes necessary to return the handset to the base station for charging.

Evolution of the landline

In an effort to keep cordless phones relevant, manufacturers have introduced extra features, such as support for SMS, Bluetooth wireless headsets and even the ability to make calls over the internet (VoIP or Voice over Internet Protocol). However, the standard landline phone still performs its main task well and remains a fixture in most Australian houses.

What to buy

Siemens Gigaset E450		$149
Siemens Gigaset SL370		$199
Uniden WDECT 3315	BEST BUY	$80
Panasonic KX-TG1811ALS	BEST BUY	$50
Siemens Gigaset A260		$59
Panasonic KX-TG4381ALT		$100

Half the models on test cost $60 or less, will do the job and have good sound quality, while the models priced above $100 offer some additional features. The Siemens Gigaset SL370 has Bluetooth support for wireless headsets, a unique feature among the models tested, while the Siemens Gigaset E450 could be a useful backyard phone as it offers protection against dust and water. The Telstra VSlim 300 includes a wireless headset, effectively providing two calling options in the one package.

All except the Panasonic models would work effectively within a multi-phone setup, although only models that support GAP (see What to Look For, right) allow you to add these models to different makes of phone. >

DIGITAL DIFFERENCES

Phones marked as DECT (Digitally Enhanced Cordless Technology) run on the 1.8GHz-1.9GHz band, which no other appliances use, and may be important to consider if your house is full of wireless gadgets. Most of the models on test use this band.

Aside from appliances, such as microwave ovens and vacuum cleaners, interfering with the performance of your cordless phone, the introduction of wireless networking within the home has created another potential source of interference, particularly with models operating on the same 2.4GHz band as most wireless networking devices. Therefore, if you have a lot of appliances in the house the Uniden WDECT3315 may not be the best option.

Other strategies introduced to deal with the increasingly crowded airwaves include Frequency-Hopping Spread Spectrum (FHSS) where the phone constantly flicks between different frequencies to find the clearest channel within which to operate.

What to look for

ESSENTIAL CORDLESS PHONE FEATURES

- A **colour display** screen can be useful to read favourite contacts.
- **Handsets supported** shows how many extra handsets of the same model can be used.
- If a model supports **Generic Access Profile (GAP)**, you can use another handset that also supports GAP with your phone from any other manufacturer simply by plugging the handset into a power point. However, GAP compliance extends only to the basic specification of the product, which means added features such as phonebooks may not work.
- **Baby monitor** Some models allow you to put the handset in another room and set it to monitor sounds such as a baby waking up.
- **Phone book** allows you to store your favourite contact numbers and dial the number by selecting the contact.
- While all cordless phones should come with rechargeable batteries, some models can use other **AAA NiMH rechargeable batteries**, which are less expensive and more readily available.
- None of the models on test include a **telecoil**, which can couple with the telecoil in a hearing aid.
- If you are hard of hearing, look for models that provide **extensive volume adjustment** on the handset and a **high handset speaker volume**.
- **Large, clearly marked keys** and a **backlit keypad** can help when making calls in low light.

A **headset port** can be handy if you make long calls and want to continue a household task or jot down notes while talking.

The **ability to page** from the base to the handset can be handy, particularly if you leave the phone lying around the house. Alternatively, you can look for a model that has a dial pad and speaker on its base, so you can also make calls from there.

Landline phones have evolved over time to include features such as support for SMS and Bluetooth.

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our CHOICE testers consider factors such as clarity of the instruction manual, the feel and comfort of the handset, if the screen is easy to read and any other special features.

Range They take the phones outside a brick house while the base still has a direct line of sight, to measure how far they can have an intelligible conversation.

Sound quality A panel of three users make calls in a moderately noisy environment and assess speech clarity, speech loudness, line noise and background noise reduction on each model.

Battery life After fully charging each phone's battery, our testers set the phones to talk and standby, and time how long each setting runs. They also time how long the phones take to recharge.

HEARING YOU LOUD AND CLEAR

CHOICE subscribers asked us to find out which phones sound loudest when taking a call and set at the highest volume level, an important issue for the hearing impaired. In response, our testers measured the highest possible volume for each handset and found significant differences in volume between the loudest and quietest models.

All the Uniden models as a group produced significantly higher volume than the other models. Of the models included in the What to Buy list (opposite), Siemens has some of the loudest (E450 and A260) and quietest (SL370). To put the volume figures into context (see the table on page 46), a typical conversation is carried out at about 60dB, city traffic is measured at about 80dB and consistent sound at 85dB over long periods of time can contribute to permanent hearing damage.

What to buy

79% SIEMENS Gigaset E450

PRICE $149

GOOD POINTS

- Out of range warning.
- SMS compatible.
- IP54 rating (water and dust resistant).
- Baby monitor.
- Colour display.
- Separate base station and charger.
- Alarm clock.
- Reduces power consumption by going into standby mode when phone is inactive for some time.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

76% SIEMENS Gigaset SL370

PRICE $199

GOOD POINTS

- Bluetooth ability.
- SMS compatible.
- Colour display.
- Out of range warning.
- Separate base station and charger.
- Alarm clock and calendar.

BAD POINTS

- No headset port (only Bluetooth as an option).
- Most expensive model in this test.

73% UNIDEN WDECT 3315

PRICE $80

GOOD POINTS

- Out of range warning.
- Clarity booster.
- Baby monitor.
- Two-way communications between handsets without the base station.

BAD POINTS

- Not GAP compatible.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES								
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Range score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Talk time (hours:minutes)*	Standby time (days)	Recharge time (hours:minutes)	Range (m)	Backlit keypad	Colour display	GAP compatible	Handsets supported	Headset port	Baby monitor	Call waiting	Phone book	Speed dial numbers
Siemens Gigaset E450	79	75	91	84	60	11:45	7	4:45	70	✓	✓	✓	6	✓	✓	✓	150	10
Siemens Gigaset L370	76	71	91	81	58	14:45	5.5	1:38	70	✓	✓	✓	6		✓	✓	250	9
Uniden WDECT 3315	73	74	65	86	69	9:00	10	9:41	50	✓			4	✓	✓	✓	100	10
Panasonic KX-TG1811ALS	72	73	59	88	72	14:00	8.5	4:51	45				1			✓	50	9
Siemens Gigaset A260	71	71	59	81	81	15:00	10	9:10	45	✓		✓	4				40	10
Panasonic KX-TG4381ALT	70	80	52	83	69	9:00	10	3:51	40	✓			1	✓		✓	50	
Sagem D15T	68	70	59	78	66	13:30	7.5	7:17	45			✓	4				30	
Oricom ECO50-1	67	66	46	86	83	16:00	10	8:55	35			✓	5			✓	10	
Doro NeoBio 20	66	70	39	83	82	15:30	10	6:00	30	✓		✓	6	✓		✓	20	
Telstra VSlim 300	65	72	65	86	34	8:00	3.5	6:40	50	✓			5			✓	50	
Oricom slim8000-1	64	69	46	80	69	15:00	7.5	6:41	35	✓		✓	5		✓	✓	100	9
Uniden DECT 2015	63	77	26	80	80	14:30	10	13:50	20	✓			6			✓	70	
Uniden WDSS 5315	62	82	26	78	71	10:00	10	11:00	20	✓			8	✓		✓	70	

71% PANASONIC KX-TG1811ALS

PRICE $50

GOOD POINTS
- Out of range warning.
- Call restriction to avoid dialling certain phone numbers.

BAD POINTS
- No headset port.
- Does not support additional handsets.
- No mute function.
- Not GAP compatible.

71% SIEMENS Gigaset A260

PRICE $59

GOOD POINTS
- Out of range warning.
- Alarm clock.

BAD POINTS
- No headset port.

70% PANASONIC KX-TG4381ALT

PRICE $100

GOOD POINTS
- Clarity booster.
- Night mode allows for a time span during which the handset won't ring for outside calls.

BAD POINTS
- No out of range warning.
- Does not support additional handsets.
- Not GAP compatible.

SPECIFICATIONS

Ringer loudness (dB)	Maximum volume for handset (dB)	Number of ringtones	Polyphonic ringtones	Can use other rechargeable NiMH batteries	Digital system (GHz)	Contact	Price ($)
73	84	15	5		DECT 1.8	gigaset.siemens.com	149
76	76	30	20	(A)	DECT 1.8	gigaset.siemens.com	199
78	86	20	10		WDECT 2.4	uniden.com.au	80
69	79	20		2 x AAA	DECT 1.8	panasonic.com.au	50
73	86	10			DECT 1.8	gigaset.siemens.com	59
74	78	7	4	2 x AAA	FHSS 5.8	panasonic.com.au	100
65	87	3			DECT 1.8	dse.com.au	35
84	79	9		2 x AAA	DECT 1.8	oricom.com.au	49
70	77	10	5	2 x AAA	DECT 1.8	doro.com.au	40
68	83	10		(A)	DECT 1.8	telstra.com.au	129
78	88	10	8	2 x AAA	DECT 1.8	oricom.com.au	79
65	89	7	4		DECT 1.8	uniden.com.au	55
70	86	7	4		FHSS 5.8	uniden.com.au	100

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Ease of use: 30%
- Range: 30%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Battery life: 20%

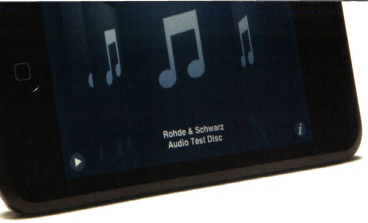
Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

All phones in this test come with NiMH rechargeable battery packs, except for (A) models.
(A) These models include Li-ion rechargeable batteries and can't use other rechargeable batteries.
** Rounded to the nearest 15 minutes.*

About the rest

- The Sagem is not feature rich but is fairly easy to use and could be a good-value option for a second handset.
- The Oricom EC050-1 delivers very good sound quality and may be more energy efficient than the previous Oricom model, however it's not very easy to use.
- The Doro has a headset port and has very good sound quality and battery performance. However, its limited range could be a factor in a large house.
- The Telstra handset needs to be placed back in the charger when not in use as it has the worst battery score of the models tested. However, it is easy to use, with a clear screen, very good sound quality and a wireless headset for taking calls when away from the base station.
- The Oricom slim8000-1 is attractively styled but not as comfortable to hold or easy to use as the other models.
- The Uniden models performed well except for their poor range of only 20 metres. So if a long range is not important to you, they're a good option.



Watch and listen

The video component of hybrid media players grows ever more popular.

nutshell

- Battery life isn't related to the size of the player and varies greatly; you'll get less battery life watching video.
- Small screens don't necessarily equate to a bad picture, but large screens definitely equate to a heavier player.

Portable media players, MP4 players, MP3 and video players; there's no shortage of names when it comes to these hybrids on the market. Capable of playing both music and video, most of the media players on test have their musical capabilities sorted; while the video quality was relatively good for most of the players, our problems arose in the ease of use for video – check out the profiles on page 49 for details.

CHOICE tested 13 new players, and three Next G phones with media player capability – see the Next G test in our December 2008/January 2009 issue for the full line-up of phones. Of the media players featured in this test there is only one hard-drive player, the Cowon. It's an OK performer if you're looking for large storage capacity and video quality. The others are all flash memory devices and many come in a variety of capacities.

We tested a number of models, from Sony and Creative, which varied only in storage capacity or one additional feature between them, and found little difference in overall scores.

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our CHOICE testers check how easy the players are to set up, play music and video and rip and transfer music and video files with the software provided or, if none is supplied, using Windows Media Player (or iTunes for the music test with Apple products). They also evaluate how easy each player is to handle, carry around or wear.

Sound They listen to each player with the earbuds provided to evaluate sound quality.

Video They watch the video and assess it for colour, clarity and accuracy of rendition. We have listed the claimed video life in the table, but in future we will test the playing time.

Batteries To check how long the battery on each model lasts while playing music, our testers play the same tracks on each model at the same volume on repeat-play mode until they switch off. For the Next G phones, we test with and without flight mode activated, but found only a 5% variation and so have listed the results without flight mode activated.

Video

In testing the video capabilities of the media players, we've had to change our overall test method. We've added a video assessment and ease of use component for encoding some in-house video, which uses a common format all the players had to convert using either their own software or, in the case of the Apple models, a third-party piece of software. We have scored both sound and video quality equally because of the growing popularity of the video component of these players.

Software

We used either iTunes or Windows Media Player (WMP) if there was no software supplied. Downloading iTunes is free, but is quite large at about 64MB for Windows XP, so there will be a cost if you're on a limited internet plan. WMP is installed with Windows operating systems, but the latest update is 25MB, so it's not so small either.

Both are easy to use for simple tasks such as ripping CDs, transferring to a player and organising music on your computer, but also contain some digital rights management functions which may restrict their usefulness.

Most of the audio software supplied with the players is reasonably easy to use, but the Lenoxx software was difficult to install and instructions were difficult to follow. The Creative Zen X-Fi software had to be replaced with a 20MB downloaded version as the supplied version didn't work properly.

Video conversion software, however, is a different story. A majority of the players' supplied video software ranged from only poor to OK for ease of use. Only the Creative, Philips and Sandisk players had video software that was relatively easy to use.

The Apple products and the Nokia phone needed a third-party tool (downloadable) to convert the in-house video. We found the way the Apple products' software deals with the MPEG format and the Nokia instructions penalised their video ease of use scores. To convert the video for the Sony players, we had to upgrade a Sony software tool at a cost of $US12.95.

We would like to see video software become just as easy to use as the audio software. Ideally, simply dragging and dropping a video file, regardless of the format, into an intuitively named directory and having the player auto-convert the video would be easiest for a consumer. >

What to buy

Media players with flash drive

84% SONY NWZA728B

PRICE $199
CAPACITY 8GB

GOOD POINTS
- Very good sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Excellent battery life.
- Earbuds fit into ear canal.
- Easily fits in pocket.

BAD POINTS
- Had to pay to upgrade Sony software.

84% SONY NWZA826KB

PRICE $229
CAPACITY 4GB

GOOD POINTS
- Very good sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Longest battery life in this test.
- Earbuds fit into ear canal.
- Easily fits in pocket.
- Bluetooth support (headphones included).

BAD POINTS
- Sound quality when using the Bluetooth headset.
- Had to pay to upgrade Sony software.

83% SONY NWZA729B[#]

PRICE $279
CAPACITY 16GB

GOOD POINTS
- Very good sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Excellent battery life.
- Earbuds fit into ear canal.
- Easily fits in pocket.

BAD POINTS
- Had to pay to upgrade Sony software.

[#] Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

79% SANDISK Sansa Fuze

PRICE $129
CAPACITY 4GB

GOOD POINTS
- Very good sound quality.
- Compact unit.
- Comparatively inexpensive.
- Easily fits in pocket.
- Can expand memory.

BAD POINTS
- Small screen for video.
- Video conversion software must be downloaded.

78% APPLE iPod Touch

PRICE $549
CAPACITY 32GB

GOOD POINTS
- Very good sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Large screen size.
- Excellent battery life.
- Second-highest storage capacity.
- Wi-Fi support (802.11 b/g).

BAD POINTS
- Inferior transfer of mpeg-2 video.
- Comparatively expensive.
- Comparatively large unit.
- Third-party video conversion tool has to be downloaded.

77% CREATIVE Zen X-Fi (16GB)

PRICE $330
CAPACITY 16GB

GOOD POINTS
- Rated equal first in sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Easy transfer of mpeg-2 video.
- Earbuds fit into ear canal.
- Comparatively small unit.
- Wi-Fi support (802.11 b/g).
- Easily fits in pocket.
- Can expand memory.

BAD POINTS
- Supplied software would not rip properly without upgrade.

77% CREATIVE Zen X-Fi (8GB)

PRICE $250
CAPACITY 8GB

GOOD POINTS
- Rated equal first in sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Easy transfer of mpeg-2 video.
- Earbuds fit into ear canal.
- Comparatively small unit.
- Relatively inexpensive.
- Easily fits in pocket.
- Can expand memory.

BAD POINTS
- Supplied software would not rip properly without upgrade.

Media players with hard disk

69% COWON iAudio A3

PRICE $679
CAPACITY 80GB

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Large screen size.
- Largest storage capacity.

BAD POINTS
- Comparatively expensive.
- Comparatively large and heavy unit.

Next G phone

75% APPLE iPhone

PRICE Dependent on provider.
STORAGE TYPE Flash
CAPACITY 16GB

GOOD POINTS
- Rated equal first in sound quality.
- Excellent video playback quality.
- Large screen size.
- Next G mobile phone with digital camera.
- Wi-Fi (802.11 b/g) and Bluetooth support.

BAD POINTS
- Inferior transfer of mpeg-2 video.
- Comparatively expensive.
- Comparatively large unit.
- Third-party video conversion tool has to be downloaded.

If you're keen to watch movies or display photos on your media player, models with the largest screens are likely to be useful.

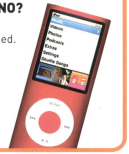
About the rest

Video quality reduced the scores for the majority of the rest, but most play music quite well. None are difficult to use and all except the Lenoxx have mid-range or better sound scores. Lenoxx also has a low battery score.

Both the HTC and Nokia Next G phones were let down by their video playback and battery scores. The Sandisk Sansa View and Philips were let down by their video playback quality. Even the smallest screened media player, the Samsung, had a very good video score, but was let down by its ease of use.

WHERE IS THE NEW NANO?

The Apple iPod nano was released too late to be included. We'll publish full test results as soon as they are available.



USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use (40%)
- Sound quality (20%)
- Video quality (20%)
- Battery life (20%)

Battery life scores are calculated so that a player that averages 36 hours or more gets 100% and one that lasts six hours gets 50%. The battery score is based on at least two tests.

Playback while recharging means it's possible to listen to your music while the player is connected to the mains power or your PC and recharging.

Mac-compatible Other than the Apple players, some players' functionality may be reduced compared with use on a PC.

Capacity is in gigabytes – 2GB can store about 500 songs of average length.

Software supplied Apple players use iTunes, which can be downloaded for free from the Apple website. Other players without specific software can also use iTunes or Windows Media Player.

Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

** Functionality may be reduced compared with use on a Windows PC.*
ns Not stated.
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.
(B) We had variable results of up to 20% with this player.
(C) Data transfer only.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES				
Brand/model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Video quality score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Average measured battery life (hours:minutes) rounded to nearest 15min	Claimed maximum video playing time (hrs)	Playback whilst recharging (USB)	Mac-compatible *	FM radio	Supplied software
MEDIA PLAYERS											
Sony NWZA728B	84	76	82	90	97	31:45	10				Media Manager for Walkman 1.1
Sony NWZA826KB	84	76	80	90	99	35:15	10				Media Manager for Walkman 1.1
Sony NWZA729B (A)	83	76	81	90	92	27:30	10				Media Manager for Walkman 1.1
Sandisk Sansa Fuze	79	79	82	65	88	23:45	5		√	√	Sansa Media Converter (via download)
Apple iPod Touch	78	64	82	90	90	25:30	5	√	√		iTunes 7.7.1.11 (via download)
Creative Zen X-Fi (16GB)	77	71	84	90	69	12:00	5			√	Creative Centrale 1.00.01
Creative Zen X-Fi (8GB)	77	71	84	90	69	12:00	5			√	Creative Centrale 1.00.01
Creative Zen	76	75	73	90	67	11:00	5			√	Creative Zen Media Explorer 5.70.15
Sandisk Sansa View	74	75	76	55	88	24:30 (B)	7			√	Sansa Media Converter (via download)
Philips SA5245BT (A)	72	80	75	50	76	15:15	6			√	Windows Media Player, Arcsoft Media Converter 2.5
Samsung YP-S3A	71	64	72	80	74	14:00	4		√	√	Samsung Media Studio 5 6.0.1.0/5.2.1.4
Cowon iAudio A3	69	65	66	90	61	8:45	7	√	√ (C)	√	JetAudio 7.0.4.3030 Basic VX, Cowon Media Center
Lenoxx MP37100	53	58	48	40	62	9:15	ns		√	√	AVI Converter 2.0, 2.4 and 3.0
NEXT G PHONES											
Apple iPhone	75	64	84	90	74	14:15	7	√	√		iTunes 7.7.1.11 (via download)
Nokia N95	62	73	62	50	54	7:00	3			√	Nseries PC Suite includes Multimedia player 1.1 and Music Manager 2.0
HTC Touch Diamond	60	68	59	45	61	9:00	ns	√		√	Active Sync

What to look for

MEDIA PLAYER ESSENTIALS

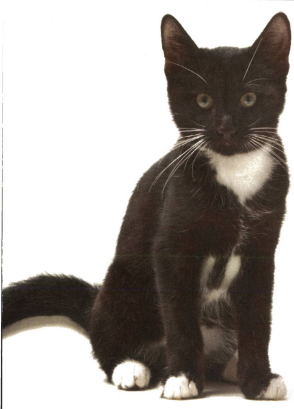
- **Rechargeable battery** All the media players have a built-in rechargeable (Li-ion or Li-polymer) battery pack that you can recharge from your computer's USB port or an AC adaptor. Batteries generally charge faster from an AC adaptor than USB port. The table on page 50 lists which players can still be used while recharging.
- **File types supported** If you want to use your player for things other than listening to music, check whether it supports the relevant file types. The most common file format for photos is JPG, for video it's MP4 – and of course they will all play an MP3 music file.

Larger screens These are useful if you've got lots of music files to organise, or want to store and view photos and video. If you want to use them to watch movies or display your photos only the largest models are likely to be useful.

Fast forward You may want to fast forward or rewind through some of your media files, especially videos. All the media players on test have this ability.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions (mm, HxWxD)	Weight (g)	Capacity (GB)	Screen size (mm, W x H)	Screen resolution (pixels, W x H)	Battery	Minimum system requirements	Contact	Price ($)
93x51x10	72	8	36x49	240x320	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	sony.com.au	199
93x51x10	73	4	36x49	240x320	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	sony.com.au	229
93x51x10	72	16	36x49	240x320	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	sony.com.au	279
79x49x10	71	4	38x30	220x176	ns	Windows XP SP2	sandisk.com/sansa	129
110x62x8	129	32	51x76	320x480	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2 or Mac OS X v10.4.10	apple.com/au/ipodtouch	549
55x83x13	79	16	51x38	320x240	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	au.creative.com	330
55x83x13	77	8	51x38	320x240	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	au.creative.com	250
55x83x12	79	8	51x38	320x240	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2	au.creative.com	180
119x50x12	93	8	37x54	240x320	ns	Windows XP SP2	sandisk.com/sansa	199
58x107x10	107	4	57x44	320x240	1 Li-ion polymer	Windows XP SP2	philips.com.au	180
95x44x10	68	4	28x35	176x220	1 Li-ion polymer	Windows ME 128	samsung.com.au	149
79x134x25	296	80	86x51	800x480	1 Li-ion polymer	Windows ME 128 MB RAM	cowonglobal.com	679
94x56x14	90	4	34x57	ns	ns	Windows 98	lenoxx.com.au	150
115x63x12	148	16	50x75	320x480	1 Li-ion	Windows XP SP2 or Mac OS X v10.4.10	apple.com/au/iphone	Telco
99x53x22	145	8	53x41	320x240	1 Li-ion	Windows 2000	nokia.com.au	1059
102x51x12	123	4	42x55	480x640	1 Li-ion or Li-ion polymer	Windows XP	htc.com/au	999



Hair affair

CHOICE finds the vacuum cleaners that best deal with annoying pet hair and still perform well when partially full of dirt, just like real life!

nutshell

- In most circumstances, a power head will deliver better results when picking up pet hair.
- Almost all these premium-priced models are good at dirt pickup and are easy to use.

You've been asking for it, so CHOICE has introduced pet hair removal as part of our vacuum cleaner test. And in most houses, vacuum bags and bins are not emptied after each use, so we also tested to find out how well each model performs when partially filled with dirt.

Of the 15 premium-priced vacuum cleaners on test all but one deliver good or better performance picking up dirt from carpet, while our recommended models are also excellent at picking up pet hair.

At great expense to his sensitive nose, our tester developed a method to discover the best vacuum for picking up cat and dog hair, as well as the other types of strand-based particles typically found in the home. Our tester also partially filled up each vacuum with dirt to see how well they perform under real life conditions. However, we didn't use just ordinary dirt, but rather a combination of materials and particle matter especially constructed in Europe, to deliver a consistent result across all our testing. This will allow you to compare the performance of one model against another in future tests. Due to the changes in our testing, direct comparisons should not be made with scores for products on past tests.

GREEN

DYSON Ball DC24 HEPA

At $649, this model is not only one of the cheapest in our test, it's also one of our top-scoring models and on our recommended list. One of its stand-out features is that it uses only 700 watts of power compared with 1400 watts – the average for the other models. This and the other DYSON models tested also use a bin, thus saving on bags.

Changing of the guard

In 2007, vacuum cleaners that use a bin to collect dirt outsold bag models for the first time. The trend continued throughout 2008 as bagless vacuum cleaners pull further ahead and they look set to dominate the market in 2009.

Of the models on test, eight used bags while seven used bins. Although there is no major performance difference using either a bag or bin model, as both are in our recommended list, bags can be expensive at about $20 for a pack of five, or even up to $60 each for the reusable fabric variety.

Barrel vacuum cleaners outsell upright models across all price points by a significant margin, often more than tenfold. However, at the premium end of the market the upright model is a little more common. >

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

No vacuum cleaner is ideal for people with disabilities, but for those in a wheelchair or with back pain the Samsung can be recommended, albeit with some reservations.

- The on/off/variable power controls are located on the wand, so no bending down is required to operate them.
- The cleaning head is easy to move on the carpet, it has crevice and upholstery tools, and a dusting brush with on-board storage for all of them. The telescopic wand is a good length and the bin is easy to empty, but at 9kg it's fairly heavy to carry.

What to buy

83% ELECTROLUX Twinclean Z8280

PRICE $899

GOOD POINTS
- Relatively compact power head.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Very easy to move the cleaning head over the carpet.
- Excellent controls.
- Variable power.
- Excellent bin, easy to empty.
- Excellent for pet hair removal using the power head.

BAD POINTS
- On-board storage for two tools only.
- Slight high-pitched noise, but not irritating.
- Very heavy.

81% SEBO Airbelt C3.1

PRICE $990

GOOD POINTS
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Variable power.
- Very easy to move the cleaning head over carpet – rated excellent.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Very good controls.
- Excellent for pet hair removal using the power head.

BAD POINTS
- Very heavy to carry.
- Fiddly to remove/replace the bag.

79% DYSON Ball DC25 HEPA

PRICE $849

GOOD POINTS
- Very good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Excellent bin, easy to empty.
- Very good controls.
- Excellent for pet hair removal.

BAD POINTS
- Scored only 58% for cleaning corners and along edges.
- Noisiest model in the test combined with irritating high-pitched noise.
- Cleaning head is fairly tiring to move over the carpet.
- Cleaning head is too high to reach under low furniture easily, and the handle cannot be pushed down all the way to ground level.

81% DYSON Stowaway DC23 Motorhead

PRICE $1099

GOOD POINTS
- Best in this test for dirt pickup from carpet.
- On-board storage for all tools.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Excellent bin, easy to empty.
- Very good controls.
- Excellent for pet hair removal using the power head.

BAD POINTS
- Scored only 56% for cleaning corners and along edges.
- Irritating high-pitched noise.
- Very heavy to carry.
- Telescopic wand is large in diameter and may not be comfortable for some.

80% DYSON Ball DC24 HEPA

PRICE $649

GOOD POINTS
- Very good at picking up dirt from carpet.
- Good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- On-board storage for all supplied tools.
- Good reach from the power point.
- Lightest model in the test.
- Excellent bin, easy to empty.
- Very good controls.
- Excellent for pet hair removal.

BAD POINTS
- No upholstery tool.
- Irritating high-pitched noise.
- Cleaning head is too high to reach under low furniture easily and the handle cannot be pushed down all the way to ground level.

In 2007, bagless vacuum cleaners outsold bag models for the first time and look set to dominate the market in the future.

About the rest

- The Wertheim is very easy to use and excellent at picking up pet hair. However, as it only scored 64% for general dirt removal we can't recommend it in our What to Buy list.
- The Bosch and both Mieles delivered borderline performance for picking up pet hair, while the Nilfisk models performed poorly for pet hair removal. However, all these models did very well when picking up general dirt from carpets. They are also easy to use and not too loud.
- The Miele Cat & Dog M.A.X. is the only model without a HEPA filter but it does have a filter designed specifically for odours left by pets. According to the company it has an "active air clean filter fitted with active charcoal particles preventing pet hair odours from exiting vacuum cleaner".
- The Samsung and LG did well picking up dirt from carpet and are easy to use but didn't score well for picking up pet hair.
- While the Electrolux Twinclean Z8266 performed as well as the Z8280 in some tests, it was let down in the pet hair removal test.
- The Sebo Automatic X5 scored OK overall, however there are better upright options available.

HOW WE TEST

Dirt removal To test dirt removal from carpet we pre-load the vacuum cleaners with artificial household dust, the amount of which is based on the capacity of the dirt receptacle. We embed sand evenly into a section of carpet and vacuum it to a set pattern and speed. The sand collected is then weighed and recorded as a percentage of the sand applied; this is done twice for each model and the results averaged. We rate all models based on the dirt pick-up performance from carpet using the standard cleaning head.

Ease of use This is based on how easy it is to manoeuvre the cleaner and move the cleaning head on the carpet and under low furniture; how difficult it is to empty and change the dirt receptacle; the operation of the controls; and how easy the supplied accessories are to use and store.

Pet hair pick-up test We embed cat hair into the carpet and vacuum it to a set pattern and speed exactly the same way as in the dirt pick-up from carpet test. We then rate the results based on how much cat hair is left behind after the test. Where supplied, we use a turbo brush or a power head; otherwise we use the standard cleaning head.

Cleaning corners and edges Sand is spread into a right-angled corner and vacuumed to see how close to the corner each cleaner is able to pick up dirt using the standard cleaning head.

Scratch test We set the cleaning head to the hard floor setting. Where supplied, we use the hard floor tool for barrels; otherwise the standard cleaning head is set to hard floor setting, and run back and forth over a lacquered fibre board 50 times. For upright models, the brush is stopped from rotating where possible. The floor is then checked for scratch marks.

Noise Measured at the user's position at maximum setting. Some models emit a high-pitched whistle that can be irritating, even though they may not be louder than others.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES						SPECIFICATION
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score(%)	Dirt removal from carpet score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Pet hair removal score (%)	Corners and edges cleaning score (%)	Noise (dB)	Power head / Turbo brush	Crevice / upholstery tool / dusting brush	On-board tool storage	Variable power	Variable suction control	HEPA filter	Type	Power, measured at maximum speed (W)
Electrolux Twinclean Z8280	83	79	80	100	80	67	√ / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1670
Dyson Stowaway DC23 Motorhead	81	91	72	100	56	74	√ / -	√ / √ / √	√			√	Barrel	1330
Sebo Airbelt C3.1	81	72	80	100	85	65	√ / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1130
Dyson Ball DC24 HEPA	80	82	73	90	77	72	√ / -	√ / - / √	√			√	Upright	700
Dyson Ball DC25 HEPA	79	87	67	100	58	75	√ / -	√ / √ / √	√			√	Upright	1140
Wertheim 3030T (A)	78	64	85	100	79	66	√ / -	√ / √ / √	√	√		√	Barrel	1640
Bosch Ergomaxx BSG82030AU	76	83	81	50	76	63	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√		√	Barrel	1840
Miele TotalCare 5000 S5781	75	84	74	50	75	65	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1750
Miele Cat & Dog M.A.X. S5361	74	83	73	50	75	65	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	(B)	Barrel	1780
Nilfisk Extreme X200	73	88	72	30	78	62	- / -	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1690
Nilfisk Extreme X300	73	85	75	30	78	62	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1610
LG V-KC902HTM	69	70	78	50	65	68	- / √	√ / √ / √		√	√	√	Barrel	1500
Samsung Multi Chamber System SC9580	69	77	87	10	72	61	- / √	√ / √ / √	√	√	√	√	Barrel	1640
Electrolux Twinclean Z8266	67	74	80	10	80	68	- / -	√ / √ / √	√		√	√	Barrel	1660
Sebo Automatic X5	63	75	55	50	60	72	√ / -	√ / √ / -	√			√	Upright	1040

What to look for

VACUUM CLEANER ESSENTIALS

- **Variable power/suction** This allows you to lower the suction for delicate jobs, such as cleaning curtains.
- **Telescopic wand** This lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you don't have to bend too much.
- **HEPA filter** This stands for high efficiency particulate air filter – an international standard for filters that trap particles – which can help if you have asthma, a dust allergy or are sensitive to dust.
- **Dust collector** The vacuum cleaners in this test have either a **bin** or a **bag** and none are difficult to empty. The advantage of a bin over a bag is that it has no ongoing costs.

Tools The standard tools to check for are **dusting**, **crevice** and **upholstery** brushes, and having onboard storage for all makes it easier to find them when you need them.

A **turbo head** has a rotating brush driven by airflow, and a **power head** uses an inbuilt motor. While both are supposed to enhance cleaning performance, our testing has shown the power head to be the much more effective solution. However, these heads are usually larger and bulkier than a standard cleaning head.

A high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter traps particles, which can be helpful if you are asthmatic or have a dust allergy.

CHOICE VIDEO

For more information on how we test vacuum cleaners, go to www.choice.com.au/feeds/video/102314.xml and scroll down to Vacuum Cleaners and Pet Hair.

	Dirt receptacle volume (L)	Cost of bags ($) *	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
in	1.9	na	13.0	9.8	electrolux.com.au	899
in	1.3	na	10.0	10.9	dyson.com.au	1099
ag	3.1	25	10.0	10.0	sebo.com.au	990
in	0.7	na	7.8	5.5	dyson.com.au	649
in	1.1	na	8.1	7.5	dyson.com.au	849
ag	2.5	19	8.8	8.0	godfreys.com.au	799
ag	4.2	24 / 60 (C)	12.0	7.9	boschappliances.com.au	699
ag	2.7	20	11.3	8.4	miele.com.au	849
ag	2.7	20	9.8	8.4	miele.com.au	699
ag	3.2	13 / 18 (D)	11.6	10.0	nilfisk-advance.com.au	649
ag	3.2	13 / 18 (D)	11.6	10.1	nilfisk-advance.com.au	749
in	1.2	na	12.2	8.9	lge.com.au	549
in	1	na	10.0	9.0	samsung.com.au	699
in	1.9	na	13.0	8.9	electrolux.com.au	699
ag	3.7	25	10.6	8.4	sebo.com.au	930

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal from carpet: 40%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Pet hair removal: 15%
- Corners and edges cleaning: 15%

All models scored 100% in the scratch test. Pet hair for testing supplied by Woof Cat & Dog Grooming, Bondi.

Noise For comparison, a typical conversation is carried out at about 60dB while city traffic is measured at 80dB.

Features See What to Look For, above.

Measured power Higher power doesn't guarantee better cleaning performance, as the table shows.

Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

na Not applicable – doesn't use bags.
** For five branded bags, non-branded bags may be available at a lower price.*
(A) A new floor tool will be included with this model.
(B) No HEPA filter but includes filter to remove odours produced by pets.
(C) Reusable fabric bag.
(D) Available in packs of four.

A quiet cuppa

Modern cordless kettles are sleek and efficient, but some are noisier than others.

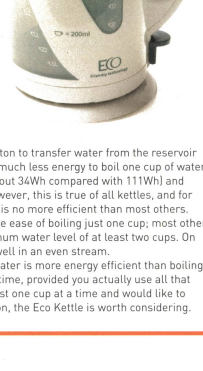
nutshell

- All the tested kettles boil water quickly and efficiently.
- Our two top kettles claim to boil quietly – and they do.

When consumers contact us about kettles, noise is one of their main complaints. Some models have been compared to low-flying jets and even pneumatic drills. An exaggeration, perhaps, but it is true that some kettles are much noisier than others. Even though most of them boil in just a few minutes, the noise can still be a nuisance, especially in an open plan kitchen/living room.

CHOICE put 13 cordless kettles to the test and included a noise score to help you choose one that boils not just quickly, but quietly. >

GREENER TEA?



The Eco Kettle claims to potentially save a lot of electricity by making it easy for you to boil only the amount of water you need – one cup, for instance – rather than routinely filling the kettle each time you boil it. The manufacturer claims that when used as directed, the Eco Kettle uses on average 31% less energy than other kettles. This could equate to saving as much as one day's household energy consumption per year.

The kettle has a water reservoir and separate boiling chamber, each with easily visible water level indicators, and a valve button to transfer water from the reservoir to the boiling chamber. It uses much less energy to boil one cup of water than it does to boil one litre (about 34Wh compared with 111Wh) and of course boils it faster too. However, this is true of all kettles, and for boiling one litre, the Eco Kettle is no more efficient than most others. The difference is its comparative ease of boiling just one cup; most other kettles have an indicated minimum water level of at least two cups. On the down side, it doesn't pour well in an even stream.

Boiling a large amount of water is more energy efficient than boiling the same amount one cup at a time, provided you actually use all that water. But if you mostly want just one cup at a time and would like to reduce your energy consumption, the Eco Kettle is worth considering.

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Each of the following factors are weighted equally: controls; filling; pouring; removing/replacing on the base; water level indicator; balance and handle comfort and balance of the handle; accessing the inside for cleaning.

Noise Our tester measures the noise at the halfway point when boiling one litre. A noise level of 40dB is quiet, while 55dB–60dB is equivalent to normal conversation, and 67dB is equivalent to a typical vacuum cleaner.

Boil performance The time taken to boil one litre of water initially at 23°C. The lowest score, 49%, equates to three minutes 37 seconds; the highest score, 75%, to two minutes 57 seconds.

Energy efficiency The energy required to boil one litre of water initially at 23°C. All the kettles are efficient; each uses about 110Wh to do this.

Other tests The kettles are also assessed (but not scored) for stability and dry-boil safety. All are reasonably stable and switch off automatically when boiled dry.

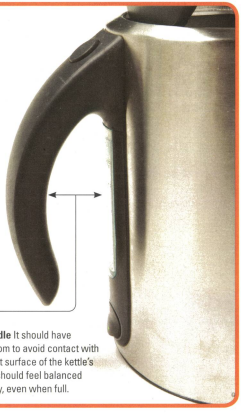
PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use
Russell Hobbs 3090	80	71
Breville Ikon BKE570	77	68
Morphy Richards Manhattan 43018 (A)	74	72
Magimix 7MM11566	72	73
Delonghi KBX2416	71	69
Maxim SS128A (B)	69	68
Morphy Richards Burgundy Trim Dome 43325	69	71
Sunbeam Quantum Evo KE6300	69	74
Tefal BI7625	68	72
Eco Kettle	67	62
Sunbeam Café Series KE9200	67	63
Breville BKE420	66	66
Russell Hobbs Reflection Cordless 10790	66	69

What to look for

KETTLE ESSENTIALS

- **Water level indicator** This should be clearly marked and easy to read from both sides, making the kettle easy for both left- and right-handed use.
- **Indicator lights** These should be bright and obvious so you can see them even in a well-lit kitchen.
- **"Off" warning noise** A noisy kettle probably doesn't need one, but for a quieter model, a tone (or audible click as the switch resets) to alert you the water has boiled could be handy. The Breville Ikon BKE570 has one, while the Morphy Richards Burgundy Trim Dome 43325 has a whistle feature.

Wide lid or spout These make it easy to fill the kettle. Lids should open easily and preferably be hinged so you won't lose them.



Comfortable handle It should have enough finger room to avoid contact with the potentially hot surface of the kettle's body. The kettle should feel balanced and not too heavy, even when full.

The noise of a boiling kettle can sometimes be a nuisance, especially in an open plan kitchen/ living area.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use: 40%
- Noise: 40%
- Boil performance: 10%
- Energy efficiency: 10%

Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

** Empty kettle not including base.*
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.
(B) Cosmetic changes in December 2008.

SPECIFICATIONS

Noise score (%)	Boil performance score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Noise (dB)	Claimed capacity (L)	Lid type	Weight (kg) *	Material	Contact	Price ($)
0	73	84	45	1.7	Removable	0.82	Stainless steel / plastic	salton.com.au	79
0	59	77	42	1.7	Hinged	1.08	Stainless steel / plastic	breville.com.au	110
0	55	80	55	1.6	Hinged	1.55	Stainless steel / plastic	morphyrichards.com.au	150
0	69	82	65	1.7	Hinged	1.53	Stainless steel / plastic	cambur.com.au	199
0	71	84	64	1.7	Removable	0.90	Stainless steel / plastic	delonghi.com.au	79
0	55	83	62	1.7	Removable	0.81	Stainless steel / plastic	maximhousewares.com	40
0	49	78	62	1.7	Hinged	1.18	Stainless steel / plastic	morphyrichards.com.au	100
0	70	81	66	1.7	Hinged	1.01	Stainless steel / plastic	sunbeam.com.au	60
0	73	83	66	1.7	Hinged	1.26	Stainless steel / plastic	tefal.com.au	80
0	58	81	61	1.4	Hinged	1.09	Plastic	neco.com.au	70
0	63	77	63	2.0	Hinged	1.45	Stainless steel / plastic	sunbeam.com.au	119
0	75	83	66	1.7	Hinged	0.83	Stainless steel / plastic	breville.com.au	75
0	64	80	67	1.7	Hinged	1.01	Stainless steel / wood grain plastic / glass	salton.com.au	109

A modern cordless kettle should boil water quickly and quietly, be easy to fill, pour well and have a water level indicator visible from both sides.

What to buy

80% RUSSELL HOBBS 3090

PRICE $79

GOOD POINTS
- Very quiet (as claimed).
- Very easy to fill.
- Pours well.
- Water level indicator is at the handle and visible from both sides.

BAD POINTS
- Nothing to mention.

77% BREVILLE Ikon BKE570

PRICE $110

GOOD POINTS
- Very quiet (as claimed).
- Very easy to fill through the lid.
- Pours well.

BAD POINTS
- While the water level indicator is visible from both sides, it is not easy to read as the levels are indicated in small print.

74% MORPHY RICHARDS Manhattan 43018

PRICE $150

GOOD POINTS
- Quiet.
- Reasonably easy to fill.
- Pours well.
- Water level indicator is easy to read and visible from both sides.

BAD POINTS
- Expensive.
- Doesn't reset automatically when lifted from the base.

72% MAGIMIX 7MM11566

PRICE $199

GOOD POINTS
- Easy to fill through the lid.
- Pours well.
- Water level indicator is at the handle, easily visible from both sides.
- "Cool touch" dual wall keeps the exterior surface cool.

BAD POINTS
- Expensive.

71% DELONGHI KBX2416

PRICE $79

GOOD POINTS
- Pours well.
- Water level indicator is at the handle, easy to read and visible from both sides.

BAD POINTS
- Slow to fill through either the spout or lid due to small openings.

About the rest

Overall, the rest of the kettles are OK, but are let down by a few bad points.
- The Maxim has a tight-fitting lid that can be hard to remove, and its water level indicator has small print.
- The Morphy Richards Burgundy Trim Dome 43325 is slow to fill through either the spout or lid due to small openings.
- The Sunbeam Quantum Evo KE6300 and Tefal are noisy.
- See Greener Tea?, page 56, for comments on the Eco Kettle.
- The Sunbeam Café Series KE9200 has an indicator only on one side.
- The Breville BKE420 is slow to fill through either the spout or lid due to small openings, and its water level indicator is not easy to read.
- The Russell Hobbs Reflection Cordless 10790 is noisy and its water level indicator has small print.

HD: Highly Disappointing

CHOICE discovers that even the best of the high definition set-top boxes are only adequate.

nutshell

- None perform well in our TV tuner tests.
- You may be better off buying a new TV with a built-in tuner.

The point of an HD set-top box is to replace your existing television's tuner. If you have an older analog TV, the box will give you the option of watching digital programming, and if you have an LCD or plasma TV with a standard definition digital tuner (or none at all) it will allow you to watch the HD channels.

Over our past few TV tests we've found the inbuilt TV tuners generally perform well. In recent tests some even achieved our difficult "excellent" rating, but by contrast most of these external products only manage an "OK" score.

The set-top boxes are usually fine when receiving a strong, clean signal, but as the signal strength is reduced, or noise is added, most begin to struggle. As a general rule, they perform better with a VHF signal, but this is a complex area and specific problems may bring even the best of them undone.

What to buy

We cannot recommend any of these products. All except the Wintal would be OK as a short-term substitute for buying a new TV, provided you're in an area with good reception. Buy on price and, if you're connecting it to a recording device such as a DVD recorder, a timer might be helpful.

If you are considering buying a new TV, we suggest you look for one with a built-in HD digital tuner.

Standby power

None of these products comes close to the new standard of less than one watt energy use in standby mode – using our normal scoring they all get zero.

The Beyonwiz is best at 3.3W, but even this is unacceptable given that most TVs can manage less than one watt and many less than half a watt.

This may not seem like much power, but it adds up quickly when multiplied by the millions of households in the country and the increasing number of products that are left on standby. ■

MORE THAN AN STB

The Beyonwiz is more than just a set-top box. It has most of the functions of a DVR built in, but has no hard drive. It can also act as a streaming device from a PC or home network. If you have a spare hard drive with a USB connection and can live with a single tuner, it may be an option. However, you'll be limited to recording only one channel at a time.

This model is a lot more versatile than the other products in this test, but is also more expensive and scored only 48% in the tuner test.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS			
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Tuner performance score (%)	Standby energy use (W)	On/off timer	Dimensions (cm. H x W x D)*	Contact	Price ($)	
Teac HDB841	59	58	59	9.5	5	6.5 x 29.5 x 23.5	www.teac.com.au	150	
DGTEC DG-HD3800	58	65	50	9.1	na	5 x 36 x 25	www.dgtec.com.au	179	
Strong SRT 5410	56	60	52	12.9	8	7 x 36 x 24	www.strong-technologies.com	189	
Beyonwiz DP-H1	55	62	48	3.3	100	6.5 x 39 x 31	www.beyonwiz.com.au	317	
DGTEC DG-HD5210	55	54	56	7.5	8	5.5 x 26.5 x 20.5	www.dgtec.com.au	99	
Digicrystal HDT-9500	55	58	51	8.3	na	7 x 36 x 26	www.digicrystal.com.au	149	
Phoenix JT9000A	55	55	55	8.3	na	7 x 36 x 27	www.phoenixtelevision.com.au	188	
Strong SRT 5405	55	54	56	7.9	8	4.5 x 25 x 19	www.strong-technologies.com	139	
Grundig GST3103HD	54	56	51	8.1	na	5 x 36 x 25	www.grundig.net.au	149	
Wintal STB1HD	48	55	41	8.2	na	7 x 36 x 26.5	www.radioparts.com.au	169	

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Ease of use: 50%
- Tuner performance score: 50%

On/off timer indicates the number of timed events that can be programmed.
Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

na Not applicable.
ns Not stated.
** Rounded up to the next centimetre or half centimetre, with all protruding parts included. Power cord and connecting cables excluded.*

Washing away water blues

Cleaning your car can be a sensitive issue these days. We tell you how to save water and still have a clean car.

nutshell

- If you wash your car commercially, look for a cleaning station registered with the Car Wash Water Saver Rating Scheme.
- If you do it yourself, wash the car on your lawn – two buckets is all we used for a full wash.

Whether you wash your car with a sense of pride or dread, you need water to do it effectively – even waterless solutions contain water. The amount used to clean a car can vary wildly, ranging from less than a litre up to 150L. Choosing a method is complicated by price, and energy and chemical use. Is the water recycled? How do you know chemical-tainted water isn't going into the stormwater drains?

CHOICE compared commercial car-cleaning methods with what you can do at home (see pages 61-62). We didn't include mobile car wash services, as the cost of the fuel used in driving to your home is an environmental issue and as such, means the real cost can't be compared with the other methods. We also tested three low-flow car cleaners that claim to save water (see On Test, page 63).

Car wash star-rating scheme

The Car Wash Water Saver Rating Scheme, accredited by the Smart Approved Watermark, was set up by the Australian Car Wash Association (ACWA). The scheme provides a star rating system for commercial car wash companies where each star represents the amount of water used by the company per car washed.

3 Star 4 Star 5 Star

- 3-star car wash uses between 121L to 140L per wash.
- 4-star uses between 101L and 120L.
- 5-star uses up to 100L per car wash.

These amounts are for normal conditions. In areas under drought conditions, the maximum allowable water usage will be up to 70L for a five-star car wash.

To verify the claims of the car wash companies, an independent auditor makes spot checks of accredited companies. The scheme is currently voluntary, however the ACWA hopes to make it a national licensing condition in the car wash industry. In the meantime, look for the five-star rating at your local car wash. If it's not prominently displayed, ask why they are not a part of the star-rating scheme.

How do members wash their cars?

We conducted an online poll to find out how our members clean their cars and of the 261 people who responded, 47% use a variant of the traditional hose, bucket and sponge method, while 40% use a commercial method.

When cleaning your car at home, wash it on the lawn (if you have one) or the driveway and direct the waste onto the lawn with barriers. Look for phosphate-free detergent to lower the pollution risk. If you are tempted to wash your car on the street, you may be fined according to your state's laws for allowing pollution into the stormwater system.

If you use a commercial car washing facility, you can reduce your costs by making it part of your regular chores – instead of making a specific trip, include it as part of your shopping routine. Commercial car washers are required by law to collect all their trade waste, such as grease, oil, tar, rubber and detergent. It's disposed of by collectors and the remaining water is directed into the sewer for treatment.

Some commercial car wash companies recycle their water and the ACWA is undertaking a study looking for more effective ways of recycling. >

Car wash options compared

METHOD	COST					
Car wash type	Water (L)	Water ($)	Sponges ($)	Detergent ($)	Service ($)	First wash ($)	20 washes ($)
Bucket and sponge	100	0.16	3.00	8.00	0.00	11.00	14
Hose with trigger nozzle	120	0.19	3.00	8.00	0.00	11.00	15
Hose and sponge	150	0.24	3.00	8.00	0.00	11.00	16
Self-serve bays	33	na	0.00	0.00	3.00	3.00	53
Low flow, high pressure	23	0.04	3.00	8.00	110.00	121.00	121
Auto-wash	Not known	na	0.00	0.00	10.00	10.00	204
Car wash cafés	33	na	0.00	0.00	24.00	24.00	480
Waterless car wash	< 1	< 1	3.00	5.50	0.00	8.19	113
Mobile waterless car wash	< 1	< 1	0.00	0.00	37.00	37.00	733

Comparing car washing options

Cost is the average for a single wash, excluding water in a commercial car wash – see the table on page 60 for the full cost breakdown.

Bucket and sponge

Simple, traditional and popular.

GOOD POINTS

- It's inexpensive.
- There's no waiting.
- Satisfaction of doing it yourself.
- Allows you to check the car for wear and tear.

BAD POINTS

- Labour intensive.
- Difficult to rinse the car with a bucket.
- You need to buy and replace sponges and detergent.
- There's a legal requirement in many areas to wash cars on a lawn.
- Possible fines for roadside cleaning.
- You have a legal obligation to ensure pollutants don't go into stormwater drains.

WATER USAGE The average bucket and sponge wash uses 100L of water, or the equivalent of 10 buckets per wash, according Sydney Water. We managed an effective bucket and sponge wash on a small/medium car with just two buckets, using a watering can to rinse the car.

PRICE $0.70

Hose and sponge

Cleaning your car with an open hose connection, allowing water to flow into a drain, is not recommended.

GOOD POINTS

- Good ease of use.
- It's inexpensive.
- There's no waiting.
- Satisfaction of doing it yourself.
- Allows you to check the car for wear and tear.

BAD POINTS

- Labour intensive.
- Large loss of water.
- Difficult to contain constant water flow in barriers for directing onto lawn.
- You need to buy and replace sponges and detergent.

WATER USAGE From 150L per wash to more than 500L per wash, depending on whether you leave the water running between sponging down the car and rinsing.

PRICE $0.80

Hose with trigger nozzle

A trigger nozzle on a hose is a legal requirement in some states when washing your car at home. It helps to reduce water usage.

GOOD POINTS

- Usually easy to adjust spray or turn it off while sponging.
- Inexpensive.
- No waiting.
- Satisfaction of doing it yourself.
- Allows you to check the car for wear and tear.

BAD POINTS

- Labour intensive.
- You need to buy and replace sponges and detergent.
- Legal requirement to wash on a lawn in many areas.
- Possible fines for roadside cleaning.
- You have a legal obligation to ensure pollutants don't go into stormwater drains.

WATER USAGE 120L

PRICE $0.75

Self-serve bays

You drive into a bay which has a high-pressure washing tool and brush that dispenses detergent. They are usually coin-operated, allow a selection of wash functions and count down so you know how much time is left to clean your car.

GOOD POINTS

- Can collect the waste for treatment and possible reuse – check if your self-serve station does this.
- Cheaper than a serviced car wash, if used regularly.

BAD POINTS

- Takes a few times to get used to the timed cleaning.
- Possible queues.

WATER USAGE Between 25L and 40L, according to the Australian Car Wash Association.

PRICE $2.70

Comparing car washing options (continued)

Low flow, high pressure car cleaner

These low water use, high pressure devices claim to save water compared with traditional methods of cleaning your car.

GOOD POINTS

- Relatively easy to use.
- High pressure cleaners can help remove dirt.

BAD POINTS

- We used more water than the manufacturers claim.
- Substantial initial cost (included in price below).
- High pressure is not enough to clean the car directly (see page 60), still requires sponging.

WATER USAGE 23L

PRICE $6.00

Waterless car wash

These cleaners claim to encapsulate dirt when sprayed onto a car, preventing scratching when you then remove the substance with a cloth.

GOOD POINTS

- Very little water used (other than as an ingredient).
- Allows you to check the car for wear and tear.

BAD POINTS

- More labour intensive than water methods.
- More expensive than most water-based methods.
- Many people fear the rubbing action will scratch the paintwork, but we found it didn't in our test – see *CHOICE* March 2005.

WATER USAGE Very little.

PRICE $5.50

Auto wash

Either touchless or brush rollover, this system is a simple drive-in car wash, which is generally paid for beforehand and is located in service stations.

GOOD POINTS

- Totally automated.
- You don't have to be out in the cold or hot weather.
- Some recycle much of the water used – check whether yours does.
- Incorporates waste treatment into the machinery.
- Can be incorporated into regular routine as most are located at service stations.

BAD POINTS

- Brush rollover can leave scratch marks on vehicles.
- Touchless may not clean effectively.
- Possible queues.
- Expensive.

WATER USAGE Unknown, but recycling would lower amount used.

PRICE $10.00

Car wash cafés

A luxury option, these often offer a free coffee with the car wash.

GOOD POINTS

- Many services offered.
- You usually don't have to be out in the cold weather or heat.
- Can be incorporated into shopping routine as many are located at shopping centres.

BAD POINTS

- Possible queues.
- Expensive.
- Upselling tactics sometimes used.

WATER USAGE 33L

PRICE $24.00

On test

Low flow, high pressure car cleaners

We tested three low flow, high pressure car cleaners to see how they perform and whether they are easy to use. All have a pressurised spray, which is not so high pressured as to damage the paint on a car, and all are accredited by the Smart Approved Watermark. The good news is we didn't need to use more than 26L per wash – little more than a bucket and sponge option. With practice, it could be even lower.

All the cleaners are highly portable so can be used in various locations, such as a camping site and/or boat ramp. However, none claim or are able to lift dirt off a car directly – you still need to use a sponge and detergent to clean it effectively. Both the Car Cube and Watersaver use a car battery to pressurise the water and are more effective at initially wetting the car than the Autowasher, which is manually pressurised. The Car Cube and Autowasher have an integrated water container so don't require an extra bucket like the Watersaver.

CHOICE would like to see a balance in the way water is reclaimed and the energy used in doing so.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS							
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Method of operation	Average water use (L)	Storage facility	Dimensions (cm, W x L x H)	Hose/power lead length (m)	Weight, empty/full (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
Car Cube CC1 (A)	65	60	77	Car battery	25.3	Yes	29 x 43 x 35	6.1 / 5.1	6 / 19.5	www.carcube.com.au	160
Watersaver Multipurpose Liquid Pump	55	50	67	Car battery	21.3	Yes	16 x 47 x 26	6.9 / 3.1	2.5 / na (B)	www.penycollection.com	90
Autowasher AM 12	39	40	37	Manual	22.3	No	22 x 22 x 60	2.5 / na	2.1 / 13.4	www.autowasher.com.au	80

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Performance: 70%
- Ease of use: 30%

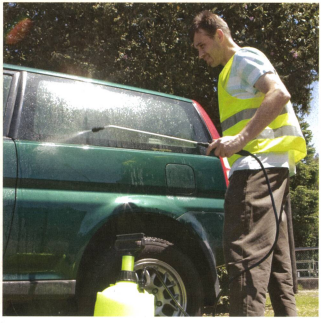
TABLE NOTES

(A) Discontinued August 2008; new model released September 2008 (CC2) with stronger pressure.
(B) Requires an extra container to hold water.
na Not applicable.

HOW WE TEST

Performance Our tester rinses each car before washing to see how much dirt is removed and scores accordingly. He then sponges each car with detergent and scores how effectively each cleaner rinses it off.

Ease of use Each cleaner is assessed on how easy it is to move around a car, its spray adjustment and how easy the head of the cleaner is to move around awkward areas such as the wheel housing. He also assesses how well each cleaner can be stored, factoring in compartments for hose attachments that are included.



CHOICE verdict

Washing your car on a lawn with a bucket and sponge can use the least water and is the most cost-effective method, however not everyone has this option. Even though self-serve car washes are more expensive over 20 washes, they use only 33L of water and five-star rated operations are environmentally friendly. CHOICE looks forward toseeing the results of the Australian Car Wash Association's recycling study. We want to see a balance in the way water is reclaimed and the energy used in doing so, given the large energy input in most recycling technologies.

CHOICE ONLINE

See our water use tips at www.choice.com.au/green.

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

DRINK ■ island2island Beverage Company has recalled **Angostura Lemon Lime and Bitters** and **Angostura Lemon Lime and Bitters Light**, 330ml glass bottles, with a best-before date of 21/01/09 and between 25/08/09 and 13/11/09.
The problem They may contain glass fragments.
What to do Don't drink them. Return bottles to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD ■ Country Cuisine has recalled **Malouf's Spice Mezza**, **Jordanian Za'atar** and **Cumin Za'atar**, 100g jar, with a best-before date of September 2010, and sold in NSW, Queensland, SA and Victoria.
The problem They contain undeclared tree nuts which may pose a risk to those with an allergy.
What to do Don't eat them if you have an allergy to tree nuts. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD ■ Bella Fantasia has recalled **Bella Fantasia Hazelnut Gelato**, 240ml, with a best-before date of 26/02/09, and **Bella Fantasia 3-pack Bacio Romantico Gelato**, 375ml, with a best-before date of 29/07/09. It was distributed in NSW only.
The problem They may contain *Listeria monocytogenes*, which can cause illness or miscarriage in pregnant women, or illness in young children, the elderly or people with a low immune system.
What to do Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD ■ Menora Foods has recalled **Menora Gourmet Spices Garam Masala**, 20g plastic packet, batch code 26108 and 26208. It was sold in Woolworths in SA and NT, IGA in NSW, Victoria and SA, Franklins in NSW, Ritchies in NSW and Victoria, and Royal Foods in Queensland.
The problem It contains undeclared sesame seeds which may pose a risk to those with an allergy.
What to do Don't eat it if you have an allergy to sesame seeds. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

PHARMACEUTICAL ■ Nutrition Systems has recalled **Nutrex Research Lipo 6 liquid capsules**, batch number 10001277, expiry date 09/10.
The problem The capsules may contain traces of yohimbine.
What to do Don't take them. Return the packet to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1300 883 523 for more information.

COMPUTER BATTERY ■ Dell has recalled **Sony batteries** sold with **Dell Latitude**, **Inspiron**, **XPS and Dell Precision Mobile Workstation notebook computers**. The specific models affected are: Dell Latitude: D410, D500, D505, D510, D520, D600, D610, D620, D800, D810, D530, D620ATG, 110L, D530; Inspiron: 1100, 1150, 5100, 5150, 5160, 500M, 510M, 600M, 700M, 710M, 6000, 6400, 8500, 8600, 9100, 9200, 9300, 9400, E1505, E1705; Precision: M20, M60, M70, M90, and; XPS: XPS, XPS Gen2, XPS M170, XPS M1710. The batteries may also have been provided in response to service calls, and shipped to customers between 1 April 2004 and 18 July 2006. The words "Dell" and "Made in Japan" or "Made in China" or "Battery cell made in Japan, assembled in China" or "Assembled in Taiwan" are printed on the back of the batteries. The following battery models may be subject to the recall:

1K055	C5446	F2100	KD494	W5915	Y1333
3K590	C6269	F5132	OR331	X5308	Y4500
5P474	C6270	GD785	M3006	X5329	Y5466
6P922	D2961	H3191	RD857	X5332	OU091*
C2603	D5555	J1524	TD349	X5333	W1436*
C5339	D6024	JD616	U5867	X5875	
C5340	D6025	JD617	U5882	X5877	

The problem The batteries may overheat.
What to do Go to www.dellbatteryprogram.com, enter the identification number and check whether your specific battery is affected. Follow the instructions to obtain a replacement battery.

COMPUTER BATTERY ■ Hewlett-Packard has recalled **Hewlett-Packard** and **Compaq Notebook Lithium Ion Rechargeable Battery Packs**, for use with HP and Compaq notebook computers. The affected battery packs will have a label with a code starting with AO, LO, LI or GC, and are for use in the HP Pavilion: dv1000, dv8000, and zd8000 series, Compaq Presario: v2000 and v2400 series and HP Compaq: nc6110, nc6120, nc6140, nc6220, nc6230, nx6110, nx6120, nx4800, nx4820 and nx9600 notebook computers. They were sold between December 2004 and July 2006 in HP notebook PCs and separately as options or spare parts.
The problem The battery cell may overheat.
What to do Go to www.hp.com/support/BatteryReplacement to confirm if your battery pack is affected, and to obtain a replacement.

HEADSET BATTERY ■ GN Netcom Australia has recalled **GN 9120 Wireless Headset ATL lithium-ion battery**, distributed between January 2005 and September 2008.
The problem The battery may overheat.
What to do Don't use it. For more information and a free replacement battery kit go to www.jabra.com/sites/Jabra/na-us/campaings/BR/Pages/index.aspx or call 1800 032 030 between 9am and 6pm AEST.

CHRISTMAS DECORATION ■ Myer has recalled **Mini Christmas Candle Ring Wreaths**, sold through Myer stores since mid-September 2008. They are approximately 20cm to 25cm in diameter, and decorated with various imitation leaves, berries and flora.
The problem They may ignite if contacted by a candle flame.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to your nearest Myer store for a refund.

HAIR DRYER ■ Wesfarmers has recalled **Coles** and **Bi Lo Hair Dryer**, 3-heat 2-speed models, sold in Coles Bi Lo and Pick 'n' Pay stores between January 2006 and October 2008.
The problem Faulty cord guard protection and faulty plastic casing may lead to the risk of electric shock.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to any Coles, Bi Lo or Pick 'n' Pay store for a refund.

POOL FLOTATION DEVICE ■ Playcorp has recalled **Deep Blue Learn to Swim Seat flotation device**, a blue-coloured inflatable seat within a yellow inflatable square. It comes in two sizes: Size1, style number 81379 and APN 9312260058013, and Size 2, style number 81380 and APN 9312260058020. The style number and APN can be found on the bottom right corner of the back panel of the packaging. It was sold in Coles and Kmart stores between 1 January 2007 and 27 October 2008.
The problem A valve defect may lead to rapid deflation while in use.
What to do Don't use it, and remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or post it free of charge to Playcorp Pty Ltd, Reply Paid 1194, 7-9 Mephan St, Footscray, Victoria, 3011, and a refund will be sent to you.

SCOOTER ■ Funtastic Limited has recalled **Razor PowerWing Three-Wheeled Scooter**. The scooter was sold through the following outlets between April 2008 and September 2008: Toys 'R' Us (serial numbers between Y804065851 – Y804066250); Target (serial numbers between Y804140721 – Y804141620 and Y804018451 – Y804018750); Kmart (serial numbers between Y804104201 – Y804105355); and independent toy and sport retailers (serial numbers between Y804071341 – Y804072040). The serial number can be found on the underside of the main frame near the front wheel.
The problem Some scooters may have burrs or sharp edges on the underside of the rear platforms, which may pose a laceration hazard.
What to do Don't use it, and remove it from the reach of children. For more information call 1800 244 543 or 1800 660 655 between 9am and 4pm, Monday to Friday, AEST.

WATER FILTER ■ Aquaport Corporation has recalled **Lumina Water Cooler and Filter Bottle**, a floor standing water dispenser with filter bottle housing 3 filters, model 7138, batch number 08/2008. It was sold in ALDI stores in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria between 18 September – 25 September 2008.
The problem The float valve may not shut off as intended.
What to do Should water overflow from the water cooler reservoir, disconnect power to the unit and remove the filter bottle. For more information call 1300 764 325 or email aquaport@aquaport.com.au.

GREENWASH

Green claims battle goes on

A year into CHOICE's campaign against greenwash, we are delighted to report some wins but our fight for consumer protection against misleading claims continues.

CHOICE continues to campaign against misleading green claims and expose some of the ploys of big business marketers. Twelve months after we turned our attention to greenwash in earnest, we have much to report.

We began by looking into just how many green claims could be found in your supermarkets, and discovered that greenwash is out of control. The number of green claims has grown and continues to grow, and many are unsubstantiated, irrelevant or downright lies.

We also launched, in partnership with the Total Environment Centre and the Institute for Sustainable Futures, the Carbon Offset Watch scheme – a comprehensive independent comparison of carbon offset providers designed to take the fuss out of deciding which one to choose.

The number of green claims continues to grow, ranging from unverified and irrelevant to downright lies.

Since the launch of our misleading green claims campaign, the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) has released two publications: *Green Marketing and the Trade Practices Act* (February 2008), and *Carbon Claims and the Trade Practices Act* (June 2008), both of which are aimed at making business more accountable and honest in this area.

The ACCC has also started taking action against companies that are misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of their products. Following our submission to the ACCC, Coopers Brewery removed its "Australia's greenest beer" campaign due to unsubstantiated green claims. GM Holden also removed its "Saab Grrrrreen" campaign for misleading claims that wrongly promoted the environmentally friendly nature of its Saab range of vehicles.

In an ambitious claim to self-regulation, the Advertising Standards Bureau suggests it is keen to monitor green claims, but CHOICE is far from confident the bureau can manage something this important given its mismanagement of other self-regulation issues.

We continue to scour advertising spaces for other dodgy green claims, but we need your help. Log on to www.choice.com.au/green and let us know about any dodgy green claims you have seen or heard. ■

SUPERANNUATION

Reining in the super waste

While forgotten and unnecessary superannuation accounts are a big part of fund managers' business, they cost consumers excessively.

For some time CHOICE has been concerned about unnecessary superannuation accounts, so we commissioned Rice Warner Actuaries to compile a report analysing the growth of these accounts and calculate their cost to consumers. The report finds that the extra fees, missed earnings and lost payments cost consumers $1.1 billion annually, from an estimated 13 million unnecessary super accounts.

The problem of unnecessary super accounts persists despite a series of industry reforms. CHOICE believes more must be done to improve the efficiency of the superannuation system.

The federal government recently issued a discussion paper exploring options for delivering on its election promise to introduce a superannuation clearing house and allow automatic consolidation of lost superannuation.

CHOICE supports these measures and we have called for their prompt implementation in our submission to the government so that Australians can effortlessly move their superannuation savings between funds as they move between employers.

Fixing the problem to prevent future multiple accounts is of little comfort to the millions of people who are missing out on retirement income now. With $1 in every $5 sitting in inactive funds, creeping up towards $1 in $3 among the industry funds sector, multiple accounts are a big part of business for fund managers.

We believe superannuation funds, particularly those with large pools of inactive accounts, such as the industry funds sector, needs to more actively facilitate and encourage account consolidation. If the superannuation industry can deliver an extra $100 to members' accounts through better systems and processes, we think that's a change worth pursuing. ■

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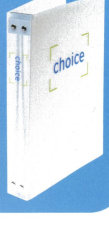

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How to use this index

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, unbolded type indicates other articles.
* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls.

Additives, food May
Air conditioners
evaporative coolers **Nov**
large split-system **Oct**
portable **Sep**
small, reverse-cycle **Jul**
Alcopops **May**
Antiperspirant **Sep**
AV receivers Sep

Baby carriers Aug
Bank account, switching Mar
Barbecues, small **Dec/Jan**
Bathroom cleaners **Jun**
Batteries,
rechargeable **Dec/Jan**
Bikes, for transport Jul
Blu-ray players **Sep**
Body numbers Mar
Broadband, home Jun

Camcorders **Aug, Dec/Jan**
Cameras, digital **Jun**
digital SLR **Nov**
Carbon offset schemes Nov
Carpet spot cleaners **Mar**
Cars
alternative fuels Feb
cleaners **Feb**
GPS **Nov**
in-car DVD players **Mar**
insurance Feb
rental traps Aug
roof boxes **Oct**
safety, ANCAP results Jun
servicing **May**
tyres **Aug**
Cashback schemes Feb
Cause-related marketing Oct
Charities Apr
Chicken **Mar**
Children, babies
carriers **Aug**
cots, portable **Apr**
playpens **Oct**
strollers **May**
Chocolate, dark **Nov**
Cholesterol-lowering
foods Apr
Cleaners, bathroom **Jun**
Clothes dryers **Apr**
Computers, laptops Nov
Cooktops, electric **Apr**
Consumer survey Jul
Cordless kettles **Feb**
Cordless phones
with answering
machine **Aug**
without answering
machine **Feb**
Cots, portable **Apr, Feb**
Credit cards,interest rates Jul
switching **Mar**
Cycling for transport Jul

Deodorant **Sep**
Dessert wine **Sep**
Detergent, liquid laundry **Jun**
Diamonds, buying Apr
Diet plans, pharmacy Feb
Digital cameras
compact **Jun**
SLR **Nov**
Digital music players **Oct**
Dishwashers **Jul, Feb**
Dogs, ethical buying Dec/Jan
Drinks pyramid Jun
Dryers, clothes **Apr**
DVD players, in-car **Mar**
DVRs **Apr**

Eggs **Jul**
Electricity, green May
Emissions trading
scheme Oct
Espresso machines **Mar**
Ethical
purchasing survey Jul
toy manufacture **Jul**
Evaporative air coolers **Nov**
Extended warranties **Dec/Jan**

Farmers' markets Apr
Feta **Aug**
First aid kits **Mar**
First Home Saver
Accounts Dec/Jan
Fish, dilemma Nov
Fish oil capsules **Aug**
Food
additives May
chicken **Mar**
chocolate, dark **Nov**
cholesterol-lowering Apr
drinks pyramid Jun
eggs **Jul**
feta **Aug**
fish Nov
ham, packaged **Oct**
healthy diet Jul
hot chocolate **Jun**
muesli **Jun**
plasticisers in food Aug
sports drinks **Oct**
wholegrains Sep
yoghurt **Feb**
Food miles Dec/Jan
Fridges **May, Nov**

Gas heaters **May**, Jun*
Glucosamine **May**
GPS, in-car **Nov**
Green labelling Jun
GreenPower May

Ham, packaged **Oct**
Hand luggage **Apr**
Health
body numbers **Mar**
first aid kits **Mar**
glucosamine **May**
healthy diet Jul
'memory' pills Aug
pharmacy diet plans Feb
Health grills **Nov**
Heaters
electric, flame-effect **Jun**
gas, unflued **May**, Jun*
Home and contents
insurance Apr, Jun*
Hospital insurance Aug
Hot chocolate **Jun**
Hot-water, solar Aug
HRT alternatives Feb

Identity fraud Oct
Insurance
car Feb
health, ancillary Sep
home & contents Apr, Jun*
hospital Aug
switching Mar
Internet filters **May**
Investment with warranty Aug
Irons **Jul**

Kettles **Feb**
Kitchen scales **Dec/Jan**
Kitchen shears **Sep**
Knives, cook's 20 cm **Mar**

Labelling, green Jun
Ladders, small **May**
Laptop computers Nov
Laundry detergent, liquid **Jun**
Lawnmowers **Nov**
Luggage, carry-on **Apr**

Media players **Oct, Feb**
Microwave
combination **Jul**
pizza oven **Jun**
Mobile phones
Mar, Dec/Jan
Moisturisers
men's **May**
with tanning lotion **Oct**
Mortgages
mortgage stress Aug
refinancing Nov
reverse Jun
MP3 players **Oct, Feb**
MP4 players **Feb**
Muesli **Jun**

Net filters **May**
Next G handsets **Dec/Jan**

Oven cleaners **Dec/Jan**
Ovens
combination microwave **Jul**
electric multifunction **Oct**
microwave pizza **Jun**

Packaging reduction Apr
Pharmaceutical company
influence on GPs Sep
Pharmacy weight loss
programs Feb
Phones
cordless **Aug, Feb**
mobile **Mar**
Pills, for memory Aug
Plasticisers in food Aug
Playpens **Oct**
Pool cleaners **Oct**
Portable air conditioners **Sep**
Portable cots **Apr**
Power, green May
Printers, all-in-one **Jun**
Property e-valuations Mar
PVRs with two tuners **Apr**

Rangehoods, canopy **Oct**
Rechargeable
batteries **Dec/Jan**
Recycled water Mar
Refinancing, mortgage Nov
Refrigerators – see Fridges
Restaurants web guides Oct
Retirement, transition to Apr
Reverse mortgages Jun
Rice cookers **Apr**
Running shoes May

Sandwich presses **Sep**
Saucepans, 20 cm **Aug**
Set-top boxes
high definition **Feb**
with DVR **Apr**
Sewing machines **Jul**
Shade sails Feb
Shavers, men's **Aug**
Shears, kitchen **Sep**
Shoes, running May
Shonkys, The Dec/Jan
Slow cookers **May**
Solar hot-water systems Aug
Solar (PV) panels Sep
Sparkling wine **Dec/Jan**
Speaker docks **Jun**
Sports drinks **Oct**
Stepladders, small **May**
Sterols in foods Apr
Strollers **May**
Suitcases, small **Apr**
Superannuation Jul
Supermarket
consumer survey May
Switching bank account/
credit card/insurance Mar
Sustainable Xmas Dec/Jan

Telephones – see Phones
Televisions
80cm **Dec/Jan**
101–107cm **Apr**
127–132cm **Sep**
Toasters, two-slice **Aug**
Toilet paper **Nov**
Toys, ethical manufacture **Jul**
Tyres **Aug**

Universal remote controls **Jul**

Vacuum cleaners
Jun, Sep, Feb

Warranties,
extended **Dec/Jan**
with investments Aug
Washing machines
Mar, May*, Sep
Water, recycled Mar
Water filters Dec/Jan
Wholegrains Sep
Wine
dessert **Sep**
sparkling **Dec/Jan**

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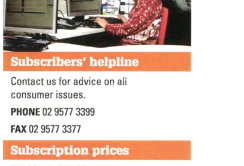

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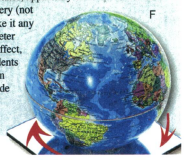
The winner of this month's best entry goes to R. Nicholls who raised the alarm about the world spinning backwards. Thanks also to J. Gorman, M. Mallyon, R.&M. Fluke, S. Watson, E. Shields, A. Lee and J. Maratos for their contributions to this month's Hard Word.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the originals.

F. How on earth does this globe rotate?

Every 18 seconds this globe rotates, apparently of its own accord. In fact it's powered by a AA battery (not supplied), but that doesn't make it any less fascinating. 13cm in diameter with a mirror to heighten the effect, it's perfect for executives, students and anyone who is interested in geography, politics or even trade on an international scale.

MGGB **$29.95**



"How on earth does this globe rotate?"

The wrong way, for starters. If the earth rotated as shown here you'd be watching the sun rise in the west and set in the east.

Fancy some unnecessary cosmetic rejuvenation?

This establishment offers "needless" techniques for doing so.

Training 'em young

Never mind that it's illegal to talk on your mobile phone while driving.

Princess Cozy Coupe
18 mths +
Includes pretend cell phone that lights up, makes ringing and dialing sounds. Easy-to-grip steering wheel has a fun working horn…beep, beep! 82 x 44.5 x H82cm. ELC LT

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